

8

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SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!



VISIT...

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IN SAGANO, KYOTO

“Master,  
let’s  
take one  
together  
this  
time!”

(All  
..... of my  
pictures  
have a  
grade  
school girl  
in them  
.....)

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YAMASHIRO OUKA  
Machi Kugui

WOMEN'S KING  
Ryou Tsukiyomizaka

YAMASHIRO OUKA  
TITLE MATCH  
UNDERWAY

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# THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

## 8

### MEET THE CHARACTERS



**YAICHI KUZURYU**  
Ryuo. He purchased a wooden sword during a field trip to Kyoto while in elementary school, but it was subsequently taken from him by his elder sister apprentice upon returning home. He was then severely scolded.



**AI HINATSURU**  
Yaichi's first apprentice. Will begin fifth grade momentarily. She prefers to buy plain rice cake wraps online and uses her favorite fillings to make her own yatsuhashi sweets.

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**MACHI KUGUI**  
Women's Shogi player from Kansai and current Yamashiro Ouka title holder. University student. Often brings ajarimochi rice cakes to the Player's Room.



**RYOU TSUKIYOMIZAKA**  
Women's Shogi player from Kanto and current Women's King title holder. Sampled the latest lemon yatsuhashi sweets in Kyoto and got hooked. Bought ten boxes to take home.



**SASARI OGA**  
Former Women's League player currently employed by the Shogi Association as the chairman's secretary. She personally prepares his afternoon snacks from scratch in an attempt to conquer his heart with flavor.



**SEIICHI TSUKIMITSU**  
Chairman of the Shogi Association. Active Shogi player and holds the title of Eternal Meijin. Eating too much of his secretary's desserts has caused him to gain weight, though he's unsure how to solve the problem.

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STORY ■  
SHIROW  
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ART ■  
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SUPERVISION  
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!! 8





# THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 8

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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THE HONORARY MEIJIN SOUKEI OHASHI CUP

# YAMASHIRO OUKA TITLE MATCH

## Synopsis

The Japanese Shogi Association created an additional Women's League and title to commemorate the first Meijin, Kyoto native Soukei Ohashi, in 1993. All active Women's League players as well as two amateurs qualify to participate. Each year's league champion is declared the challenger and faces the Yamashiro Ouka title holder in a series of three matches, of which the first player to reach two victories shall claim the Yamashiro Ouka title for that season.

## Three Match Series

First Match: Tokyo – Shogi Association Second Match: Kyoto – Tenryuji Temple Grand Hall Third match: Kyoto – Shijyo-kawara \*Third match only taking place in the event of a 1-to-1 tie.



# (MATCH JOURNAL)

I had decided to use *anaguma* from the very beginning.

Before the title match commenced, I knew that the outcome would be determined by the strategy I had spent my life continuously refining.

There wasn't a shadow of a doubt in my mind.

That much was certain because I have been researching various sequences to allow my King to arrive at one corner of the board, sequences that have become known as the *anaguma bear-in-the-hole* defensive strategy, since I was a 5th grade student in elementary school.

Successfully completing an *anaguma* is considered having a *one point* advantage over the opponent in modern Shogi (though many professionals favor a more balanced formation as of late). Feeling the advantages firsthand, I devoted myself to perfecting the technique with years of thorough research.

Moreso than the benefits it offers, the reason I pursued the *anaguma* was mainly due to the admiration I held for players who wielded its power.

However, above all else, I saw beauty in its formation.

Pieces line up one by one, stacking line by line to protect their King as if adorning him in a 12-layer *jyuuni hitoe* ceremonial kimono.

A perfectly square formation in the corner of the Shogi board is an exceptionally rare sight to behold.

That is what I find beautiful.

I sense the will of a higher power behind the proficient Mino Castle formation.

The *yagura*'s many variations give it a fun twist, as if window shopping for the perfect outfit amidst all the options at your fingertips.

Still nothing can compare to the *agaguma*'s elegant beauty.

I shall repeat myself now and forever.

I love the *anaguma*.

Therefore, no matter the outcome, there is one moment I shall never forget as long as I live.

When the heart jumps as the Lance advances to 9 Two.



YAMASHIRO OUKA TITLE MATCH 1







“I’ve got it. Let’s go to Kyoto.”

I blurt out those words just as cherry blossom trees were in full bloom.

My apprentice and I were working through some long-sequence Shogi puzzles when it hit me.

“To ..... Kyoto?”

My apprentice sitting next to me, Ai Hinatsuru looks up from the Shogi magazine open in front of us with a curious look in her eyes. The *tatami* room window is open, letting both sunlight and a warm spring breeze inside.

“Yeah, Kyoto. You’re still on break, right?”

“For about another week, yes .....”

It’s the first time in a while that Ai, a fifth grader this April, has had a long vacation.

Unlike her Master, Ai is a model student who not only gets good grades but finished her spring break homework straightaway and has spent her time researching Shogi, hanging out with the Grade Schooler Practice Group girls and basically taking advantage of her last time off as a fourth grader.

And, just like the school year in Japan, the Shogi world calendar starts in April. So, as long as they’re not involved in any title matches, Shogi pros are in the middle of a long vacation too.

The grueling placement matches are over.

Even better, I’ve been promoted to the C-1 Division and defended my title as Dragon King Ryuo.

Add in the fact that I met both my apprentices during that time, and this past year has been really busy.

I need some time to reset and get ready for another year of new battles and the research grind. A quick trip to Kyoto with my apprentice while she's on spring break wouldn't be a bad idea.

My train of thought reaching that point, I ask Ai, "Have you ever been to Kyoto?"

"Umm ..... I don't remember much, but I think so. I've visited all the big tourist spots in Japan."

"Suppose I should've expected that considering your mother owns a famous inn."

"But, but ... I really don't remember anything! I want to go to Kyoto with you, Master!!"

Tossing aside the Shogi puzzle magazine, one of her favorite things in the world, Ai starts chanting, "Kyoto! Kyoooto!"

So cute≡

"I want to go to Kiyomizu Temple! Oh, and the Kamo River, too! And ..... and Honnoji Temple! I really want to see Honnoji!"

"Sure, sure," I say, watching my apprentice bounce around like an excited puppy. "But, we already have somewhere to go this time."

"Uwhee? Where .....?"

"First, Arashiyama."

It's one of the best-known tourist spots in Kyoto ..... No, in all of Japan.

"We're going to a temple there called *Tenryuji*."

"Tenryuji?"

Ai must not have heard of it before because she's practically got question marks in her eyes.

There are seriously tons of temples in Kyoto, so I don't blame her. But

Tenryuji is famous enough that I'm sure she'd recognize a picture if she saw it.

"Do we have something to do there?"

"There's a title match going on. Yamashiro Ouka."

"Ah .....!"

Out of all six women's titles, Yama shiro Ou ka (山城桜花) is the only one that has the character for *flower*, the *ka* at the end. It's the elegant and graceful title.

"When it comes to Shogi players, who live most of their lives indoors, Shogi is about the only thing that can get us to go outside. It's not like we have dates to go on."

"....."

"Hm? Did I say something weird?"

"No. Not really."

Is it because she's getting into the higher elementary grades? Ai's got a very *grown-up* look on her face that's impossible to read.

"Since this will be my first time seeing a Women's Title Match in person, I'm sure there'll be plenty for me to learn. I would like to go to gain valuable experience for the future."

"Of course, there'll be lots to learn."

Caught off guard by my apprentice using formal wording out of nowhere, I collect my thoughts and explain why it's held in Kyoto in the first place.

"The Yamashiro Ouka Title Match is unique. It's fun to go and just watch."

"Unique .....?"

"For starters, it's three total matches. There're only two title matches set up like that in both pro Shogi and Women's Shogi combined, Yamashiro Ouka and Women's King."

There are more if you include newcomer and amateur tournaments, but pros don't use that format because winning two in a row would seal the deal. For comparison, the Ryuo *Challenger Match* has three total matches.

"Next, the second and third matches take place two days in a row."

"It would be hard enough playing league matches twice in two days ..... But, it must be exhausting playing for a title like that!"

The matches themselves are over real quick and you have to have nerves of steel to get over a loss in Match Two and play a decent game. Of course, it's physically demanding as well.

"But I'd have to say the fact that Match Two and Match Three get played out in the open at some of Kyoto's most famous sites is what makes the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match really special."

"In the open? So people are there watching the match?"

"That's right. You went through something similar at the Mynavi Preliminaries, so think of it like that but on a bigger stage."

A whole bunch of matches happen at once during Mynavi Preliminaries.

Except, there's only one happening at the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match and both players are decked out in gorgeous kimonos in front of beautiful scenery. It's designed to draw as much attention as possible.

It certainly helps that there are tons of foreign tourists in Kyoto. The number of people watching is on a completely different scale compared to regular matches.

Cameras go off every second and the players can hear what the audience is saying.

Under conditions like that, it's easy to tell who has the mental fortitude to take the Yamashiro Ouka title and who doesn't.

"But ..... Why play Shogi in those conditions?"



“Kyoto itself is the focus for the Ouka title. Think of it like a collaboration between the traditional Japanese sport of Shogi and the city, using the title match to boost tourism.”

“Now I get it!”

Growing up at a traditional Japanese-style inn, Ai is sensitive to the word *tourism*.

“Since Shogi matches last a long time and players don’t move much, it’s the perfect photo op for everyone!”

“Very true. Shogi doesn’t offer the exciting sights and sounds of usual *sports*, but that becomes a good thing when the sites and displays are part of the event.”

From a foreigner’s point of view, all these traditional things in the same spot might be artistically appealing.

“Although the first match is in Tokyo, people in Kyoto use the matches to promote the city. It becomes one big *show*, which is rare for title matches.”

“That sounds like fun!”

Ai’s got Yamashiro Ouka fever.

I take my smartphone off its charger and check the schedule.

“We could be in Kyoto before their lunch break if we leave now ..... Okay! Grab your things and meet me at the door in 40 seconds!!”

“Master! Let’s hurry!”

And so, we left on a spring trip to Kyoto.



“We’re here!”

“Well, that didn’t take long at all.”

A quick ride on the Kanjou Line from Fukushima to Osaka Station and it’s barely 30 minutes to Kyoto Station on an express train.

“Now, how to proceed from here.”

“Another train?”

“Well, let’s see .....

There’s still plenty of time.

While it’s not the fastest option, there’s something I want my apprentice to ride.

“Since we’re here, why don’t we take the *Randen*?”

“Randen?”

“The Keifuku Dentesu Railway’s Main Arashiyama Line, or *Randen* for short. It’s fun.”

Taking my apprentice’s hand, we walk into Kyoto proper.

Warm spring sun fills the air.

It’s been warm for a couple of days now, so the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. Pink petals ride a sudden breeze and flutter down onto Ai’s hair.

“Spring has sprung!”

Gently holding these springtime presents in the palm of her hand, Ai puckers her cherry-blossom-colored lips and blows them back into the air.

I watch the petals dance and say, “I hear it’s still cold in Tokyo.”

“Mom and Daddy said it’s chilly on the north coast!”

She’s probably thinking about how cold it is in Ishikawa Prefecture where she was born.

Ai takes my arm and hugs it close to her body.

“I saw on TV that there’s a cold front hovering over eastern Japan, so the cherry blossoms over there won’t bloom for a while yet!”

“I’m glad they’re blooming here in time for the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match ..... After all, the *Ou* (桜) in Yamashiro *Ouka* is the character for cherry blossom.”

The air is so comfy and warm that I’m getting drowsy just walking around.

“..... If I knew it was going to be this nice out,” I mumble with a hint of regret.

—I should’ve invited Ai Yashajin along .....

Ai Yashajin, my second apprentice who the girls have nicknamed *Ten-chan*, has advanced all the way to the Challenger Match of the Mynavi Open Women’s Shogi Tournament and could win her own title.

But the person she’ll be playing in that Challenger Match is playing to defend the Yamashiro Ouka title today.

Having her come all the way out here just to watch would just taste bad.

That’s why I didn’t even try. Even if I did, I doubt she would’ve come.

But, even so ..... We’re a small, three-person Shogi family. It would be nice to get outside and experience all this together.

I want to show that lonely girl what spring looks like .....

Whether or not Ai Hinatsuru understands where my thoughts are going, she looks at me and says, “Let’s come back next year with Ten-chan!”

“..... Yeah, let’s. Thanks, Ai.”

I’m so lucky to have such a kind apprentice. Moments like this remind me just how glad I am that I took her under my wing.

The train station comes into view as we are talking.

Seeing the station and the train next to it—.

“! Woowoow .....!”

Her eyes light up.

There aren’t many trams in Japan at all—but one of those street-faring trains is sitting right there.

“See? Isn’t this going to be fun?”

“For sure! A dong train!”

“?! ”

W ..... well, they do have a lower-pitched bell, so some people do call them *dong trains*, but ..... but still!

“Wow! Master, just listen to that dong!! Dong! Dong!”

“..... Ai, umm——.”

“Uwhee? Is something wrong?”

“No, but ..... How should I put this? Maybe ..... you could, I don’t know ..... Use better wording——”

“???”

Ai looks like I just gave her brainteaser, leaning so far to the side her body looks like a—?—question mark.

“..... Double dong?”

“No!!”

Why does she think combining the two *dongs* makes it better?!

We arrived at Arashiyama while this back and forth was going on.



“Oh wow! So this is Arashiyama!”

Ai is just so impressed looking at the mountain from Togetsu-kyo Bridge that she can't contain her excitement.

She keeps saying, "It's so pretty!"

The Katsura River is flowing beneath our feet.

This scenery has been written about in every possible way for centuries.

That being said, the *ancient Japan* vibe certainly isn't as strong as it used to be.

It's impossible to overlook all the souvenir shops between the historical sites or the continuous stream of tour buses shuttling in tourists who never stop taking selfies.

Streets in Kyoto are already some of the narrowest in Japan, which puts the traffic jams here on a level of their own.

"That's a lot of tourists ..... Maybe we should hurry on past," I suggest once I get an *Apprentice at Arashiyama* picture. But Ai puts her foot down, which is unusual for her.

"B-b-but! I want to buy souvenirs for my friends!"

"There'll be time on the way out."

"Awww!"

Ai tears her sorrowful eyes away from a souvenir shop. Man, that's cute.

But she was back to her usual self in no time.

That's because the road into Tenryuji Temple is jam-packed full of souvenir shops.

Since the number of tourists around plummets after we get away from Togetsu-kyo Bridge, we get to walk at our own pace down wide and open streets.

"It's decently warm today, so why don't we get some green tea ice cream?"



“Green tea!≡”

It’s synonymous with Kyoto. Walking down the streets while snacking on green tea flavored snow cones, ice cream, smoothies or whatever is lots of fun.

I take a few pictures of Ai licking her green tea ice cream cone and enjoying every bite on our way to the temple and we arrive in no time.

It’s impossible to miss because of the massive boulder with characters that spell out *Tenryuji* sitting out front.

“Temples host matches, too! I thought they always happened at inns or hotels.”

“Shogi can be played anywhere there’s a *tatami* room big enough for it. You might be surprised how many matches happen at temples.”

On the flipside, we have to stay and eat someplace else outside of the temples ... more often than not.

While that’s inconvenient, of course, the history behind the settings and the quiet atmosphere make up for it. Lots of great matches take place inside of temple walls.

“Tenryuji Temple hosts quite a few title matches. The temple itself is a world heritage site and the grounds have been used as movie sets before.”

“In movies?!”

“*Toei Uzumasa Movie Village* is close by. Don’t you remember *Filming Studio Station* on the Randen?”

“So, that’s why!”

Kyoto’s various charms are working their magic on Ai. She’s hooked.

“Master, let’s hurry up and go inside!”

“Why don’t we walk around Sagano Shrine a bit first? We won’t have any time for sightseeing as soon as any of the association staff spot us.”

Looping away from Tenryuji Temple, we make for Sagano Shrine.

“This shrine is said to be good for people looking for relationships or to have kids.”

“!!”

“There is a divine stone statue on the grounds called the *okameishi*. Legend has it that any wish you have will be granted within a year with just one touch. Since we’re already here, why don’t we go pay it a visit?”

“Yes, let’s!!!!”

She’s chomping at the bit.

I should’ve known she was determined to become a strong Shogi player. Big Sis and I were the same way back when we were little.

Ai goes straight up to the divine statue and starts rubbing it like she’s expecting a genie to come out. After immortalizing this precious moment with a few photos, the two of us leave the shrine and head toward the mountain.

“Uwhee. There’s so much bamboo out here.”

“Very true. Heh heh heh .....

How’s she going to react when she sees *it*?

A quick climb and we’re at Tenryuji Temple’s north exit. Except we go right past it and up another hill.

Then——Ai comes to a surprised halt as soon as that *road* opens up in front of us.

“A bamboo archway! Oh ..... wooow!!”

The sun is high in the sky right before lunchtime, but there’s enough bamboo on both sides to block out the rays.

“Bamboo Grove.”

You could say it's Sagano's biggest tourist attraction, but it doesn't cost any money to go inside. Anyone can come and go as they please. That's just how deep the history in Kyoto runs.

"I ..... I've seen this place on TV!!"

Looking more impressed by this than anything else all day, Ai looks up at the sky through the bamboo stalks.

"Beautiful ..... The air, the light, everything is green ....."

"Yep. Sure has that *I'm in Kyoto* feel to it."

This place shows up in commercials all the time.

There are so many foreign tourists here that taking a picture without someone else in the frame is easier said than done. But, with a little luck and great timing, I get a nice *Apprentice at Bamboo Grove* picture. A very nice one!

All ..... of my pictures have a grade school girl in them .....

No, no. I'm just documenting my apprentice's growth.

I don't have any ulterior motives for taking pictures of a little girl. Ai's parents (especially her mother) have been asking to see her smiling face a lot recently.

"Master, did you get a cute picture?"

"Y-yeah. A perfect one."

"Let's take one together this time!"

Ai goes up to the closest foreigner and says, "*Foto puriizu!*"

They must have understood because they take a picture of the two of us.

Then they come up to her and say, "Hey sweetie, can we have a picture with you too?" and suddenly Ai is in the middle of their photo. She's so cute I bet she looks like a Japanese doll to them.

"Me too, me too!" Even more foreign tourists gather around and the next

thing I know Ai is the star of an impromptu photo shoot.

Ai's cute charms break language barriers .....

"That's one cute little sister you have there."

I try to figure out how to respond to one of the foreign guys talking to me, but Ai says from my side.

*"Hii izu mai masutaa! Doragon kingu!!"*

"???"

..... That's got to be confusing. Sorry.

Finally, the photo rush is over. Able to catch a breath, we retrace our steps back to Tenryuji Temple's north gate.

... And get spotted by association staff the moment we step onto the grounds.

"Ah! Ryuo!"

"And Hinatsuru-sensei! Welcome, welcome! Please, right this way! Don't be shy!"

It's only been a year since she left the north coast.

This child who's only played Shogi for a year and a half is now in a position to be called *sensei*.

That's proof enough that the Shogi world revolves around talent.

The association employee leads us to the staff break room. I ask him about the match along the way.

"Has lunch break started?"

"Yes, it has. The challenger went to break during her turn a little early."

"I see ....."

The rules say it's fine for a player to use their own waiting time to start the break earlier than scheduled. I bet it's easier to think things over in a private

room rather than in front of the board.

Especially for someone as hotheaded as she is .....

“Hello. I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu. Pardon me.”

“P-Please pardon me! Women’s League member, Ai Hinatsuru!!”

We stand in the staff break room doorway and announce ourselves in big voices.

Everyone is expected to introduce themselves like this whenever they travel to local title matches to do research on their own time. It’s important for members of the Sub League and Practice League to introduce themselves by saying their Master first. Since this is the first time Ai has come to a title match that I’m not playing in, I spoke a bit more formally than necessary to show her how things are done.

Adults tend to like kids with good manners.

Sure enough, all the geezers in Kyoto’s Shogi world take to her right away, offering her *yatsunashi*, *nikki ame* and all sorts of candy and juice.

“Well, if it isn’t the Ryuo,” says a man dressed in traditional Japanese clothing sitting next to an analysis board when Ai and I come close.

Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*. The Shogi Association chairman.

“Miss Ai Hinatsuru as well. How great of you to join us.”

“Th ..... Thank you for having me! I’ve come to do research!!”

“Very admirable.”

The chairman is blind, but still looks in Ai’s direction and compliments her while smiling with his eyes.

Taking a look around, I notice something’s different.

“Huh? Did Ms. Oga go somewhere?”

Sasari Oga, the chairman's secretary and retired Women's League 1-dan, usually follows the chairman around like a shadow. It's weird not seeing her with him.

"She is working as the match recorder today."

"Ms. Oga is? That's unusual."

It's not all that strange for retired players to be match recorders or Shogi journalists, but for her to spend time away from the chairman is just bizarre.

"She was born in Kyoto, you see. The locals will be much happier to see her in the spotlight than myself."

"Ahh, I see."

"The match recorder receives almost as much attention as the players themselves. I thought local Shogi fans would like an opportunity to see her in her element, so I assured her that I would be fine by myself."

"But, did Ms. Oga protest? She didn't cry or anything?"

"She said, *One would rather die than be abandoned*, in a very serious tone."

That's a hundred million times heavier than what I was thinking .....

"T-That's Ms. Oga, alright. She's committed her life to you ....."

"I would prefer that she not shackle her own future for my sake."

It's not the chairman's fault that ..... Well, maybe it is if you look at the bigger picture.

"But she's doing what she does because she wants to."

"That puts me in a difficult position. She should not need to rely on me forever. As the saying goes, *Let your darling children travel*. Surely, Ryuo, you wish for your own apprentice to grow strong under her own steam, do you not?"

"Well, yes, I do, but ..... Ai is already a full-fledged member of the Women's



League. She doesn't rely on me much at all anymore."

The chairman *looks* in Ai's direction.

"How would you react, Miss Hinatsuru, if you were told something similar?"

"Well ....."

She thinks it over for a few seconds.

"I would do what Master asks to give him a false sense of security before finding proof that he's seeing another woman."

A shiver crawls up my spine as the chairman turns back to me and says, "Though, I must say," with a smile. "Your timing is truly impeccable, Ryuo. She is waiting for you."

"Come ..... again?"

"Would you be willing to pay the challenger a visit?"

"Visit .....? As in, go to the break room? During lunch?"

"Precisely," the chairman nods before he leans in and says quietly so that only I can hear, "because this match needs to be more competitive. You will see what I mean."



"The heck'r you doin' here, Trash-heap?!!"

That woman was halfway through her box lunch when she spits fire at the mere sight of me.

The Challenger—Women's King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

Since her mind was somewhere else when Match One of the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match was played in Tokyo, she got completely destroyed and is now against the ropes.

So, yeah, I wasn't expecting a *Yo, Yaichi! Nice to see you!* by any means, but ..... I didn't think she'd be this bad.



If I were going to give this scene a name, it'd be *Restless Youth*.

She never wears any *hakama* over pants whenever she puts on a kimono, so she already looks like one of those *women of the night* ..... But, with her *obi* sash hanging loose and those long legs out in the open like this, she looks more seductive than beautiful.

Just to be clear ..... Very seductive.

I can't have my grade school-aged apprentice seeing this, so I block Ai's view with my back. She must be scared because she's almost hiding behind me and has a good grip on my shirt.

Cautiously, very cautiously, I ask, "Y-you're not drinking, right .....?"

"I ain't gonna knock one back today. Not with all those people watching."

..... Today?

"I can never get used to this freakin' kimono. I loosened it up a bit so I could eat without getting squeezed half to death, but meh ....."

"Which is how this happened ....."

Men's kimonos get tied with a sash around the waist, so they're not that bad compared to women's ones. They can be uncomfortable to wear while eating because the sash gets tied just under their boobs.

At that rate, I wouldn't be surprised if they'd loosen the *obi* to get a breath of fresh air.

Even male pros strip down a bit during break time, so this wasn't exactly a bad idea, but .....

"Ehh, I can just get this all fixed up later. There's gotta be an attendant around somewhere."

"This is a temple, remember? You think there are any?"

An inn is one thing, but the chances that someone who knows how to put on

a female kimono is just hanging around are pretty slim. A priestess, maybe?

“If anyone here would know how to fix that kimono, it’d be Machi. But, asking your opponent to fix your clothes would probably taste bad .....

“Hah! I’d rather go back out there and play like this!”

“Oh, no, no! You can’t do that!! Think about what would happen if you showed up looking like this after I was in your breakroom during lunch!! Rumors would spread like wildfire!!”

“You better own up, Trash.”

“Own up to what?!”

This truly bizarre back-and-forth keeps going until——.

“Uh ..... umm .....

Ai pokes her head out from her hiding place behind me and says in the tiniest voice, “I, I can tie *obi* .....

“Not bad, Small Fry! You’re a lot more useful than that Master of yours.”

Ryou is thrilled.

“I’ll even tip you if I get this title. How’s 500 yen grab you?”

That’s all .....?

“Excuse me, Tsukiyomizaka-sensei? Don’t forget that this girl here is already a member of the Women’s League ..... One that you’ve played against before .....

“Shut it, useless Trash! Learn something from your pint-sized apprentice and make yourself handy. What’re you even doing here, anyway?”

I’d love to leave right about now.

While part of me regrets coming to Kyoto at all, I just know I’ll get an earful from the chairman if I back out now. I can already see it.

Pushing forward is hell, and hell is waiting if I go back ..... Meaning, going forward would be the lesser of two hells.

“But, what could I possibly do? Giving any Shogi advice would cause all sorts of problems and I’d be labeled as a cheater for helping you. But I can’t do anything other than Shogi .....”

“Tell me a funny story.”

“Hooooow?!!”

Listen, just because someone lives in Osaka doesn’t mean they can come up with something hilarious on the spot!

But, in the end, I know she just wants distraction.

“It’s your fault if I lose, got that?”

“That’s a bit much, don’t you think .....?”

The title match is over if Ryou loses today.

The wonderful people of Kyoto City have spent the last year making sure everything is ready for a third match. All their time and planning will go to waste if she can’t pull out a win.

I don’t know what the Match Two board looks like right now, but judging from Ryou’s mood, I’d say things aren’t going well for her.

It’s not every day she sighs to herself and complains left and right.

“Besides, Machi’s got too much of an advantage in Kyoto. Anything and everything goes her way. The location, the dress, even the food ..... I’m *away*, simple as that.”

“.....”

I honestly do feel sorry for her about that.

Machi Kugui was born and raised in Kyoto. Add in the fact that her family descended from nobility, and there’s no person alive worthier of holding the

title *Yamashiro Ouka*.

Basically—*no one wants anyone else to hold that title.*

Of course, nobody's going to say that to Ryou's face.

Even so, I bet she can feel that vibe through her skin in a big match like this one. People in Kyoto are experts at getting their true feelings across without words anyway.

So long as Ryou isn't totally oblivious,

*..... Is it okay for me to become Yamashiro Ouka?*

Or: *Screw it!! I'll take that big, fat title you love so much and shove it in all your faces!!*

She's feeling one way or the other.

No matter which one though, it won't help her Shogi at all. Strong emotions of any kind make reading the board next to impossible.

Ryou points at her boxed lunch with the chopsticks in her hand and says, "What ..... is this stuff? Like ... vegetarian? I get that it's healthy or whatever, but it does nothing for me ....."

"I can relate to what you're saying."

I also feel sorry for her about this.

There are tons of options for lunch whenever matches take place at inns or hotels, but we have to take whatever's available when we play at temples, shrines or civic centers.

Ryou is unusual among Women's League players because she eats a lot during matches. Probably, she can't focus without a full stomach.

Little things like that can have a big effect on matches.

Not that Machi, who eats next to nothing, anticipated that weakness and had any control over today's menu.



“All I’m asking you is to improve the atmosphere so I can enjoy *something* while scarfing down this tasteless rabbit food. Entertain me.”

Who died and made you king?

But——.

“Food, hmm .....

Word has it that Shogi has become popular enough that a manga was recently made about the food players eat during matches, so more people are asking us about that.

Commentators always need to have a few stories prepared to fill time during title matches, so I have a small stock ready to go at all times.

Yes, yes.

There is one story I have about food and Shogi.

“Let me tell you about what happened about a month after Ai came to Kansai——.”





# SHOGI ON THE GRILL



“Wheeeew~~ .....! That was another long day of Shogi.”

“Long day.”

Ai and I stretch in unison after a full day of practice matches at the Kansai Shogi Association’s second floor classroom and give our exhausted minds and bodies a break.

April. Osaka.

I——holder of the Shogi world’s top title of *Dragon King Ryuo*——Yaichi Kuzuryu am with my first apprentice, a little girl who just started the fourth grade.

Ai Hinatsuru.

Originally from a traditional style Japanese inn on the north coast, this grade schooler came all the way down here by herself and, after many twists and turns, ended up living with me in my apartment not too far away from the association.

Long story short: she’s my live-in apprentice.

That’s how I’ve ended up living like a father of one at the age of 16. I have to figure out what my apprentice wants for dinner each night ..... But the thought of going home and cooking right now is such a drag.

“Ai. What’s your favorite food?” I ask as I put the Shogi pieces back in their box.

My apprentice makes *scissors* with her fingers as she says, “Cwabby!”

“Crab, huh? It’s not in season, though ..... Oh, what about *yakiniku*?”

“I love it! I could eat it every day!”

“That settles it! Let’s go chow down on some meat for a pick-me-up before heading home!”

“Yaaay! Meat! Meat!!”

*Yakiniku* is a style of Japanese BBQ where you get to cook beef, pork or chicken at a grill built into the table.

And Ai can’t wait to go. She’s bouncing around like an explosion of happiness.

Yep! She’s adorable.

I don’t have a Lolita complex or anything, but there’s nothing more precious than a happy little girl. Not in that lolicon way, though.

“But, just the two of us going would be kind of lonely, don’t you think? Mind if I invite some other Shogi players along?”

“Sure! Food tastes better with company♪”

“You got that right! I’ll run up to the Player’s Room real fast.”

Only then, once I went up to the third floor and poked my head inside the Player’s Room and saw who was there, did I realize I’d made a terrible, horrible mistake.

That’s how these things work. You don’t realize how bad your move is before you make it. Only after you take your hand away does it hit you .....



“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

The three of us are silent, sitting in a booth at a restaurant called *Sumibi Yakiniku Koyan*, which is only a five-minute walk away from the association.

By three of us I mean it’s me, Ai—and Big Sis.



All because Ginko Sora-*dual title*, my *elder* sister apprentice who is actually younger than me but joined Master Kiyotaki's Shogi family tree before I did, happened to be in the Player's Room when I stopped by, our fun *yakiniku* dinner filled with laughter and funny stories turned into a silent staring contest.

On a side note, our conversation on the way here consisted of, "Big Sis, what did you do t ....."

"Shogi."

The end.

What is this: purgatory .....

What's worse.

"..... Hey. That girl sitting over there ....."

"Holy?! That's Snow White ....."

"Who'da think that borin' guy she's with is ....."

People at the tables around us start whispering amongst themselves the moment we sit down.

Big Sis has an immensely popular nickname: Naniwa's Snow White. So many people have heard of her she's more like an idol in Osaka than a Shogi player.

She gets looks that would put real idols to shame. Skin white like snow and her silver hair make her stand out in a crowd. What's more, she's so talented that she claimed the two highest Women's Shogi Titles, *Queen* and *Women's Throne*, when she was still in grade school. Now in her third year in junior high, her perfect record in Women's League matches ever since her debut four years ago sounds like something out of a storybook. Big Sis is pretty much a living legend at this point.

I'm not half bad myself, turning pro in junior high and becoming the youngest Ryuo ever, but Big Sis's beyond human persona overshadows me at every turn. Not that I really care ..... It's fine, okay?!!

“Uh, um .....

The one braving this uncomfortable, icy atmosphere is Ai.

“Master? Are you sure it’s okay for us to eat here? Everything looks so expensive .....

“No problem. He made bank last year.”

Big Sis, not me, answers like I’m obviously going to pay for everything.

By the way, every top Shogi player’s total prize money each year is made public. The fact that I, as the Ryuo, make *XX hundred thousand yen* with each victory and all the money I’ve won in tournaments is available for anyone to see. In other words, Big Sis knows exactly what I’ve got in my wallet.

“His winnings from the Ryuo Title Match come in this year, so he could lose every match and still have more than 40 million yen. Even if he loses his title, just playing in big matches like that gets you something like 5 million, right? Must be nice, being rich. Anyone could keep their own grade school girl pet with that kind of money.”

“..... I wasn’t asking you, Auntie.”

“Who do you think you’re calling Auntie, pipsqueak?”

Butting heads already, these two.

For Big Sis and Ai, who haven’t liked each other since the moment they met, talking like this is like opening a Shogi match with 7 Six Pawn and 3 Four Pawn. In other words, the gloves come off whenever these two are in the same room and I wish they’d cut it already.

“E-easy there, Big Sis. In terms of our Shogi family tree, you are Ai’s *aunt* so to speak .....

“Even so, I’m not *Auntie*. She should be addressing me properly as *Sora-sensei* or at least Miss Sora, yes?”



“I won’t.”

“Pipsqueak .....

“Easy there, easy. Eaaasy, easy, easy,” I cut in between them. We could solve this so easily with Shogi if we were at my apartment or the association, but things could get ugly way too quick without any pieces around.

“Sorry, Big Sis. You see, Ai ... she’s only just become my apprentice and still has a lot to learn about common sense in the Shogi world .....

“.....”

Big Sis puckers her lips, which she almost never does, and slams me like a kid.

“You’re covering for her?”

“I-I wouldn’t say covering .....

“..... Hmh.”

“W-What? Is there something you’re trying to say?”

“Oh, no. What’s wrong with you liking little girls like some lolicon?”

“Look, I’m not like that, okay?! My apprentice just happens to be in grade school, that’s all!!”

“Which would you take as an apprentice, given the choice? A junior high school student or an elementary school student?”

“Huh? The grade schooler, of course.”

“.....”

“No, no, no! Who wouldn’t?! Everything in the Shogi world revolves around talent, yeah?! That means the younger, the better, yeah?! Besides, I was six years old when I became an apprentice and you were four, Big Sis! In kindergarten!”

*Thunk!* That was loud.

Looking around, it seems that Ai dropped the menu she was holding and it hit the floor. It's not all that bright in here, but I can tell that she's pale as a ghost.

"M-Master ....."

Shaking like there's no tomorrow, Ai takes hold of my sleeve and yells.

"Am I ..... am I too old for you?!"

The whole restaurant freezes over.

"J-Just barely, but I'm ..... still in single digits, and I'm not very tall so I might still be able to fit into kindergarten clothes ..... Ah!! Oh no, I'll be turning ten soon .....!"

"Hold up. Wait just a second, Ai. That's not what I was talking about——."

"Master! I'll, I'll do the best I can! I'll be just like the cute little girls Master likes! I'll put off my birthday so I can stay younger that much longer!! I'll do anything, so please ..... Please .....!!"

"Okay! Alright!! Nine-year-olds are just fine!!"

"..... Really?"

"Yes, really!! I love grade school girls!!"

"..... As dates, too?"

"T-That I do. Nine-year-olds are already young ladies if you ask me."

"E-he-he≡ I love you too, Master!"

Ai dives into my chest, smiling from ear to ear with tears in her eyes.

Big Sis is looking at me like what's left of a smooshed bug on the side of the road. The restaurant staff and other customers are staring right along with her.

*Yakiniku* restaurants are supposed to be hot, but it's got to be below freezing in here.

I'll never be able to eat here again, will I .....? I liked this place, too .....



"Enough of this pointless banter. I'm ordering."

Completely unfazed by all the wide-eyed stares in our direction, Big Sis grabs the menu and thinks for a few moments before summoning a waitress.

"Excuse me. Could I get three servings of the top roast, three of the special boneless ribs, three of the outside skirt cut, three square cuts of rump, three servings of beef guts ..... make it four, three Chateaubriand tenderloin and three bowls of rice and one bowl of stone-roasted Korean bibimbap rice. Three extra plates, too. Also, three servings of *mino* rumen, heart and cheek meat each. Oh, and three orange juices. That's all for now."

Hungry, are we?

"Hey, uh, Big Sis .....? Are you sure it's a good idea starting off with top roast and boneless ribs? They're pretty fatty."

There's a Shogi word called *overplay*, which basically means doing too much. It's better to start with something light, like tongue.

"Huuh? I'm starving here, so let me eat something I can feel. Oh, excuse me, waitress. Three black-marbled sirloin steaks as well, please."

"I'm saying you ordered way too much already!! Listen when someone's talking to you!!"

"What's wrong with ordering meat at a *yakiniku* restaurant?! A few pieces of marbled sirloin are nothing to a title holder!!"

"Marbled, marbled, enough! You might as well slide your Rook too, going out

on a limb like that!! You're Static Rook party so stick to the standards, not some *marbled* offshoot!!"

"Food has nothing to do with Static or Ranging Rook! What's a Static Rook party member supposed to eat, anyway?!"

"S ..... Static ..... steaks?"

"Huuuh? What kind of meat is that?"

"Ummm ..... The hindquarters? Or something .....?" I say while glancing at the menu.

There is a note explaining that *rump* is the soft meat on the hind legs. It also says that cow pelvises are shaped like an H. So that's why it's called an *H bone*. I learned something new.

Plates of raw meat start arriving at our table while the argument rages on.

"Wow! Everything looks so good!!"

"Look at all those yummy white streaks!"

I can tell Ai is getting excited. One look at all those tenderloins and ribs glinting like powdered snow in this dim restaurant is making my mouth water.

"I'll start grilling."

Naniwa's Snow White grabs the nearest set of tongs and starts laying out the cuts of meat on the wire mesh grill top. Not to be outdone, I start doing the same. Ai's hands are too small to hold the tongs, so she's eagerly watching the meat cook from her seat.

That's when the trouble starts.

Big Sis doesn't know the meaning of the word *patience*. She's the type of person who likes to cook as much meat as possible by filling up every available space on the grill.

On the other hand, I prefer to slowly cook each and every piece to grilled

perfection. There's a charm to that perfect piece of meat fresh off the grill. You can't just line up slices of meat on the grill and hope for the best.

It's that difference of opinion that sends sparks flying.

"Yaichi, your efficiency needs work."

"Okay then, Big Sis. Maybe you should update your technique? You know, people haven't mixed meats on the grill like that since the 1960s."

"Oh yeah? Why are you grilling so slow? There'll never be enough ready for the three of us like that. Don't waste space."

"You're the wasteful one, Big Sis. Seriously, you're such a newbie at this it's embarrassing."

"Huuh? Are you blind? Just look at this perfect formation and tell me what's being wasted."

"Right there. That space."

"Where?"

"Right there, see?"

"Tell me, would you?"

"..... Like – I – said!"

I switch my brain from *yakiniku* mode into Shogi mode and say, "That skirt cut sitting at 5 Six was clearly a bad move! Get it out of the way ASAP and advance the rib up from 5 Two."

"But, the rib can only move up the fourth column, yes? Doing that would make a meat tower on the fourth column, and I can tell just by looking that it's a terrible formation. Nothing can move in a jam like that."

"What are you talking about?! Moving that rib to 5 Six would make the fatty oils drip onto the flame and make it bigger, yeah? Then heat would reach the meat from 3 Six to 6 Four. Everything would cook faster, so we could get them

off the grill before things get jammed up.”

“Huuuuh? Counting on dripping oil to cook meat faster? That doesn’t make any sense! What are you supposed to do if the oil doesn’t drip? It’s a bad formation, simple as that.”

“You still don’t get it? I’m saying you should think about how the meats work in tandem and spread out the formation. Yeesh, no wonder journalists always say you *focus on skirmishes but not the big picture*.”

“Ohhh? Is that something someone *who holds out so long in the late game that opponents get annoyed into making mistakes* should be saying?”

“Well, I happened to win a title that way.”

“I have titles, remember? Two of them to be exact.”

“A title’s worth is measured in numbers.”

“True. But maybe you should say that once you have more than one.”

“Anyway, I’m going to work some worldly magic on that wasteful formation of yours!”

“This is my territory, got it? The Sora Zone. Reach beyond that line and I’ll knock you out.”

True to her word, she blocks my tong with her own as soon as I reach over the grill. Two tongs collide in the air like clashing blades as the real battle gets underway .....!

“The meat is ready, so I’ll get it off the grill, okay?”

Left out of our intense debate, Ai leans forward with her chopsticks at the ready and starts plucking the meat off the grill and onto smaller plates one by one before deploying new pieces onto the grill like pieces off a piece stand. She’s surprisingly good at rolling with the punches.

Then, she looks up at me with pleading eyes.

“Master. I’m so hungry (>-<)”

“Hm? Oh, sorry, sorry. Go ahead and eat.”

“Yaaay!” she says with glee and smacks her hands together.

Big Sis and I call a temporary truce to our never-ending debate, pick up chopsticks and dig in.

As for the flavor——.

“Hnn! That’s good♪”

“..... Not half bad,” Big Sis mumbles, her face a blank slate.

She’s constantly going to inns and hotels all over Japan to defend her titles. Those places always use the best ingredients to serve top-of-the-line dishes, so Big Sis has a surprisingly good idea what *fine dining* tastes like for a girl in junior high school. If she says something is good, you can take that to the bank. I’d love to eat here again ..... But, that just won’t happen .....

Just as I was bemoaning my fate and chewing the meat between my teeth, the cutest little squeal happens next to me.

“Owwchee!”

“Something wrong, Ai? Are you okay?”

“Too hooot .....

“Hey, now, don’t burn your mouth. Let the meat cool off a bit before you eat it, okay?”

“I whill.”

It seems my apprentice has a sensitive tongue. So cute.

Keeping her promise, Ai starts blowing on the next piece with little puffs of air with a hint of desperation in her eyes. Cute. My apprentice is adorable.

Then, once the steam had died down, she timidly puts it in her mouth.



“And? Is it good?”

“Yep! ≡”

My apprentice looks up at me with a smile that could very well melt off her face at any moment and gives me a big nod. Her legs are swinging back and forth beneath the table like a happy puppy wagging its tail. So damn cute.

That smile is enough to keep me full for a long time.

I’ve always come to *yakiniku* restaurants determined to eat as many pieces of meat as I possibly could, but now I want my apprentice to have as many as she can handle.

“Alrighty! Keep that grill burning!!”

I roll my shoulders and pick up my tongs.

Some pieces of meat are ready, but they’re scattered among others that need more time on the grill.

To make matters worse, there are holes where meat was already taken off which is messing up the formation and the smoke coming off other pieces is making it hard to see.

But, it’s a pro’s job to sort through the chaos .....!

“Here we go! I’ll grill you up but good!!”

“Yaichi ..... Was that supposed to be a pun like *Static* steaks? Do you think *yakiniku* is just some game? Your formation is literally burning up.”

“Don’t look now, Big Sis, but your loin at 8 Three is burnt to a crisp.”

“Promote. Promote it now.”

She means flip it over. 8 Three loin promotes.

Bursts of flame erupt from every corner of the grill. It’s time for lightning quick decisions. We follow the *yakiniku* standards to the letter in a furious round of give-and-take! Intense!!

“Eat this, Big Sis! Move-Loss Loin Exchange!”

“Naïve, Yaichi! Gutless *yakiniku* will never hold out.”

“Big Sis, all those *mino* cuts won’t protect ..... Huh!! T-That’s—a *Mino* Castle?!”

At some point during this back-and-forth, Ai starts frowning and looks up at the two of us with a very sour look in her eyes.

“It’s impolite to play with your food!!”

“S-Sorry .....”



Once we’d mostly eaten our way through what Big Sis ordered to start with, we could finally sit back and relax for a bit.

“Whew. I was worried for a bit there, but we finished the job pretty nicely.”

“My tummy is sooo full (>-<)”

Ai gently rubs her bulging stomach as she makes the cutest little groan. She looks like a cute little toddler.

By the way, *give the final shove* in the Shogi world literally means to *take down the opponent’s King*. Generally speaking, it can also mean to *finish what you start*.

In this instance, it means to clean your plate. Back when I was a live-in apprentice, Keika always said, “Finish every bite, even what you don’t like.” Unfortunately, Big Sis would always shove whatever she didn’t like onto my plate.

“Man, that was good ..... But, I’d like something else after all that meat.”

I open the menu and think for a bit.

“Alright, mixed veggies and chilled noodles should hit the spot. You want anything, Ai?”

“Umm ..... Pudding, please!”

“Is it just me, or were you looking at my hair instead of the menu when you said that?”

There happened to be cold pudding on the menu anyway, so I order that. Capping off the meal with a cold treat sounds pretty good.

“Anything for you, Big Sis? There’s sherbet ice cream.”

“Three Mangalica porkchops. Pork liver, too.”

“Are you seriously ordering more meat?!”

“I should be the one asking you why you’re ordering vegetables at a *yakiniku* restaurant. Are you brain-dead? Go harvest some in the fields if you want a salad so bad.”

What are you, a kid?!

“Come on, Big Sis. Shouldn’t you have at least something green? Eating too much meat can take years off your life, you know?”

“Why should I care? I won’t live that long anyway.”

“Why is it only people who think like that end up living long lives? You’ll probably keep those titles ’til you’re past 70.”

“.....”

She doesn’t say anything. Rather, she screams *hurry up and order* with her eyes.

Winning a verbal argument with Big Sis is impossible, so I summon our waitress and place the order. She must be a veteran because she replaces the wire grill with a fresh one at the same time.

The meat and mixed vegetables I ordered arrived after a few minutes.

Pudding, too.

Meat for Big Sis. Veggies for me. Since our orders are as different as Go and Shogi, there's no reason to fight. Peace has come to the grill.

..... Or, at least I thought so.

"Master, hey Master." Ai, swinging her legs while chowing down on her frozen pudding (yummy≡), looks at the veggies I'm roasting on the grill and asks, "What do Shogi *Senseis* eat during their matches?"

"Well, all I can really say is everyone is different."

Taking a spoonful of Ai's pudding, I explain what pro Shogi players like to have on the menu.

"I've usually got so much nervous energy that I don't eat much of anything for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Too much food at night makes me sleepy ..... A few sugary snacks here and there give my brain enough nutrients to keep working."

"Snacks≡"

"Delicious, aren't they? The important thing is to efficiently replenish the sugar in your body. Sir Ayumu actually imports blood orange juice from overseas."

"Oh, I see. No one gets sleepy drinking juice!"

I bet he's not thinking that deep into it. Chances are he just liked the sound of the word *blood* and went with it.

"He and I are pretty similar, but there are some people who eat so much that you wonder if they're going to be okay."

"Playing Shogi can make you hungry."

"I've seen players order extra chicken for their fried chicken set lunch, ate puffer fish stew the morning of a title match, order two set lunches for some reason ..... Oh, and one person I know only eats curry."

What's more, they spend more than half of their match journals talking about curry so it's hard to tell when they're talking about Shogi.

"Big Sis. Why do you think they're always getting curry?"

"Beats me. I think they said something about how all the spices keep the brain moving ....."

Yeah right.

"They've been observers for my title matches several times, but it's such a pain because all I hear is *try the curry*, just *try the curry* over and over again ....."

"But Jinya Curry, I'd eat any day."

Everyone in the Shogi world knows about *Jinya Curry*.

It's a super special recipe that the famous Tsurumaki Onsen Hot Spring Spa in Kanagawa Prefecture only serves to players and association staff during title matches.

"But you need to be real careful ordering lunch during title matches. That's important. Hotels and inns like to put their own spin on things so sometimes you'll be going *huh?* when something completely different from what you ordered shows up."

There's nothing scarier than seeing "~~~ Style ~~~with sides" on the menu.

Looking at it like that, ordering curry all the time might not be a bad idea. Curry is curry no matter where you go. Obvious, sure, but that's the most important thing.

"Big Sis, how do you decide what to order during title matches? Have any *sure-fire* suggestions?"

"Meat."

That was fast. She never wavers.

"You've always loved meat, haven't you, Big Sis? That's why you grew up to

be so aggressive ..... Take a good look, Ai. This is what happens when you only eat meat, so make sure to eat your veggies, clear?" I say half-jokingly (which also means half of me is serious), but Big Sis didn't take my joke as well as I thought she would.

"And you've grown up only eating greens, yes, Yaichi? Just like a little rabbit, remember? Put a perfectly good piece of meat in front of you ... and nooooothing! You wouldn't even touch it!!"

"What's got you so worked up .....?"

That's all I could say from under Big Sis's overwhelmingly intimidating aura. Vegetables are good for you, so what's the problem .....? I've been living on my own for a while now, so I'm trying to eat healthy .....

My apprentice looks up with a smile at Big Sis, who's flaming bright like the pork chops on the grill, and says between bites of her pudding, "That's because the meat didn't look good."

"Want a pike through your skull?!"

Big Sis tears into the grade school girl rivaling the pillars of flame bursting into the air with each drop of oil, but Ai isn't fazed.

Pudding in one hand, she says with all the confidence in the world, "Younger meat is softer and more delicious. Older meat is harder to eat because it gets hard and smelly."

"Huuuh? Maybe if it gets too old, but meat when it's matured to just the right age is so much better than when it's young. Everyone knows that."

"That's not true. The younger the meat, the juicier and more flavorful it is."

"Clueless pipsqueaks should keep their mouths shut. Matured flavor reigns supreme. You think so too, right Yaichi?"

"Say what? M-me?!"

The flames are coming my way!!

“That’s not how it is, right Master? The younger the better is what you like, isn’t it? You said so before, didn’t you?”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, Yaichi. After all, you’re not one of those lolicons, yes? You are normal, right?”

“Uhh ..... what? Why do you bring up *lolicons* just now?”

“Just answer.”

They snap in unison, leaning into my face at the same time.

“Younger is better. Right, Master?”

“Matured is better. Yes, Yaichi?”

I’m cornered.

Young meat, or meat that’s mature.

..... I really don’t care either way .....

Huh? Whaat? I’ve never thought about meat being *young*. I just eat the meat that gets served, so how should I know how young it was?

But, judging by the serious looks in their eyes, I won’t be getting out of here without giving an answer.

“Well ..... I guess matured would taste better, don’t you think? Even vegetables need time to grow, otherwise they’re too bitter.”

“!!”

In that moment, Big Sis’s face sparkles brighter than I’ve seen it in years, while Ai looks like she’s fallen into a hellish pit of despair.

Grinning from ear to ear, Big Sis snatches a piece of meat with the tongs.

“That’s absolutely right. Now, Yaichi, eat some meat. Take a bite out of a nice, mature piece of delicious meat.”

“Nah, I’ve had enough already——.”

“I said eat.”

“Yes.”

I swallow the piece of fatty pork shoved into my mouth. I think I’m gonna puke .....

My apprentice follows up the attack, her eyes tearing up as she puts the nail in my coffin by screaming at the top of her lungs.

“Master, you *dara*! Big fat liar!! You just said younger is better!!”

“D-Did I?”

“You said that you would date younger!!”

“Say what?! Why would I ever go out with meat?!”

The heck is she talking about?! Grade schoolers have such wild imaginations!!

“Here, have more meat. Yaichi. More, more.”

“Master, you liar!! Cougar lover!!”

Big Sis is shoving meat I don’t want in my face while my apprentice is ranting just inches from my ear and the whole restaurant is staring right at us——.

I’ve had enough *yakiniku* to last a lifetime!!

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YAMASHIRO OUKA TITLE MATCH 2





“..... And that’s the story.”

“Uh-huuuh.”

Ryou Tsukiyomizaki, now sprawled out on the floor and picking wax out of her ear, flicks the stuff off her fingertip and tells me exactly what she thinks.

“Was kinda boring if you ask me.”

Say what .....?

“I mean, come on. You’re just bragging about how you’ve got Ginko and Small Fry here fawning all over you. Just listening made this rabbit food taste even worse.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Fawning .....? How am I supposed to take that? This past year has been rough, and I wanted to give you an idea of what I’ve had to endu——.”

“Oi, Small Fry. Get this *obi* tied up right.”

“Ah ..... Sure.”

Ai pops her head out from behind my back like a scared bunny rabbit and slowly, cautiously inches her way over to Ryou. I wasn’t done talking!

“Master, please turn your back!!”

“R-Right!!”

Ai snaps and I spin on my heel in a panic.

*Flp, flshh* ..... Sounds of fabric being shuffled around followed by a very comfortable sounding *nhh* ..... come from behind me. Ryou sounds like she’s enjoying this .....

“You can look now.”

Still scared, I turn ever so slowly toward my apprentice—and see Ryou dressed in full kimono standing there.

..... Stunning.

All the seductively loose folds ..... become overwhelmingly beautiful when they're in the right places like this.

She didn't get the nickname Aggressive Archangel for nothing. If someone said she actually was an angel while dressed like this, I'd believe them .....

Ryou twists her body, flexing her arms to see how well everything fits and turns to Ai in surprise.

“..... Small Fry. You're pretty good at this.”

“Do you think so?”

“Damn straight. Nothing seemed to fit right all morning, but now I can barely tell I got it on. Thanks!”

With that, Women's King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka elegantly glides her way back to the arena.



Seeing the garden took Ai's breath away.

After a few moments of mesmerized silence——.

“Wow .....”

Finally, she remembers how to make words.

Tenryuji Temple's Sogenchi Garden.

“It was designated the country's first *Site of Special Historic and Scenic Importance* by the government for maintaining 700-year-old scenery in modern-day Japan. The central pond named Sogenchi is surrounded by a path

that allows visitors to see it from many angles and the garden incorporates Arashiyama Mountain itself into the view.”

It’s said that a famous Zen Master named Soseki Muso built the garden.

And, that the same Zen Master built plenty of extraordinary gardens all over the country.

“The name for the garden actually comes from when Mr. Muso drained the pond and supposedly found a stone monument that had *Sogen Itteki* or *not a drop to waste* carved into it.”

“Master ..... That’s amazing .....≡”

“That’s what it said on their website, anyway.”

“Give me back my admiration!”

“It’s fine. Shogi players like us have to memorize an almost lethal amount of standards as it is, so there’s no need to remember anything we can just look up online.”

Shogi players need as much free space in their brains as possible. Therefore, unnecessary knowledge just gets in the way for Shogi players. I’m not making excuses. It’s the truth!

The match is taking place in Tenryuji Temple’s Grand Hall with a view of the garden.

The garden is great, but the Grand Hojo Hall is one heck of a building.

There’s a set of *fusuma*-style sliding doors with a dragon flying through the clouds painted on them that divide the room into east and west. Just standing in here feels like there’s a huge dragon staring at you the whole time.

Of course, this area is usually off-limits to visitors, but it was chosen to host Match Two of the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match.

Now, visitors can walk through the surrounding hallway and see the match

and the garden at the same time. It's quite a sight.

Even for foreigners and tourists who don't understand the rules, seeing two beauties in kimono playing Shogi and staring daggers at each other seems to be enough to perk their curiosity. There's a pretty big crowd.

People involved with Shogi like us can't just walk in there willy-nilly, so the staff prepared a separate room with a tablet set up for us to watch the match in real time with updates from the match recorder.

Since Ai and I had already done a loop of the temple grounds, we decided to go track the match in there.

"Now then, this is an extremely important series match ...," I say to my apprentice as we look at the board displayed on the monitor. "Ai. What do you see?"

"Um ..... Let me think."

She leans in close to the monitor and starts analyzing. "..... Here, here, here .....,," she mumbles as her body starts swaying back and forth.

She's in her own Shogi world right now.

Reaching her conclusion, Ai says, "I think Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei* has claimed an advantage after the lunch break. The *anaguma* ..... Kugui-*sensei*'s formation is still intact, but she doesn't have a way to attack anymore ....."

"I see. Then, what would be your next move?"

"1 Four Pawn ..... I think."

Ai has chosen to deploy a Pawn over the top of the King to attack the *anaguma*'s weak point head-on.

It's sort of like bringing a sword down on a fully-armored opponent's helmet with a powerful, two-handed strike.

"You would do that? Take the strongest move with the shortest route to

victory?”

“Yes.”

“30 points.”

“Whaaa .....?”

She looks up at me with surprise in her eyes.

Me saying that the *strongest move* was only worth *30 points* must have thrown her for a loop. Me not complimenting her plan of attack also probably came as a shock.

“If this match were one and done, you’d be right.”

I explain my reasoning.

“But, this is a big match in a series. Say you win the first one, you won’t win the title without winning the next as well. That being the case, you want to inflict as much damage as possible, don’t you think?”

“Damage .....?”

“Leave lasting scars on your opponent’s heart. The kind that won’t heal overnight.”

“B-But ..... Master said etiquette was necessary for Shogi ..... that we shouldn’t make opponents suffer any longer than we have to .....”

“That’s what we tell amateurs.”

That’s my way of telling her: *You aren’t an amateur anymore*, without saying it out loud. I need my apprentice to take on a *tournament Shogi player mindset*.

“Pros always have to fight against the same opponents ... which makes increasing your chances of victory by making your opponents *dread* playing against you a valuable skill as a pro. Don’t you think so?”

“.....”

She doesn't respond.

Looks like it will take time for a girl as straight-laced and kind-hearted as Ai to accept what I just told her.

She might not be able to accept it at all.

But——.

"Margins in the pro Shogi world are paper-thin. The same is true for talent. Even effort is like that. Only wins and losses are cut and dried. A single piece of paper—one thin line being higher or lower can change someone's life forever. You're better off not fighting at all if you aren't willing to start stacking."

Because it's obvious what'll happen.

"..... Is Tsukiyomizaka-sensei trying to add to her stack right now? In this match .....?"

"Yes. She's not giving Machi an opportunity to surrender. Instead, she's drawing out the match to make her squirm in front of a live audience. Whether Machi loses heart or gets angry, she won't be able to keep a cool head in the next match, which gives Ryou the advantage."

Machi Kugui is known as *Machi the Tormentor*.

Extremely good at twisting opponents into submission once she has an *anaguma* in place, she tends to draw out matches to make her opponents squirm and suffer for as long as possible. That's how she got the name.

But right now, Ryou is the one tormenting *the Tormentor* and, in effect, making the agony of defeat sting ten times worse than normal.

Games like Shogi and chess are called *mind sports*, but they share a key difference from their athletic cousins like baseball or basketball.

There are many different reasons a person or a team can lose playing sports.

Of course, mental condition plays a role, but most problems can be traced



back to something physical. Perhaps teamwork was the issue, or the coach made a bad call.

On the other hand, there is only one reason for a Shogi loss: I was weak.

Since there's nothing to blame but yourself after a loss, there's nowhere for the pain to go. I doubt there's any worse feeling on earth than the moment you realize you lost a Shogi match.

"Do ..... do we have to go that far? Breaking our opponents' hearts ..... That's just so ....."

"That's what it means to play for real. People can't cross blades with actual swords and expect to walk away without getting cut, right? We don't leave physical wounds playing Shogi, all the damage is done on the inside. After all, you have to break an opponent's fighting spirit to get them to throw in the towel."

"B-But ..... those two. They're best friends ..... aren't they?"

Yes. Very close friends.

"That's exactly why they want to win against each other more than anyone else. Because they're good friends."

The fact that they've known each other so long makes it that much more important ..... Lose, and they're faced with living the rest of their lives in fear that the other is stronger.

"It's scary, and for people destined to battle for supremacy like Shogi players, it casts doubt on who they are. Wild animals are nothing but livestock once they've been broken."

"Live ..... stock .....?"

Giving up on the climb to the top might make things easier.

But people like us would also have to give up being released from the desire to win we've had for as long as we can remember.

The thing is, we know that winning is the only way to do that.

Describing the darker side of the human spirit as a desire for *competition* may be egotistical, but it makes it possible to survive in the Shogi world.

Your heart will break in no time if you don't accept it.

..... No.

We might all already be broken. Justifying tearing an opponent's heart to shreds by saying, *As long as it's for the competition*, probably isn't right on a human level.

Which would make Ai's reaction correct as a human being.

But I still have to change this kind, gentle girl's heart bit by bit.

My only other option would be to let her go, and that's not going to happen—.

“Never forget this, Ai. The ones you have to stamp down first are the ones closest to you.”

“.....”

Many different emotions pass through her big, round eyes ..... Mostly strong refusal mixed with little glistening specks that look like tears.

The closest ones to her now would be the other Practice Group girls and Keika and Ai Yashajin. Big Sis is trying to become a full pro but will end up playing against her in league matches sooner or later. After that, it's only a matter of time before younger opponents appear on the scene. Ai has to turn them all into livestock that produce victory stars for her.

—Maybe I should drive the point home a bit more?

I open my mouth to say the words that will push my innocent apprentice into the wicked world of competition.

But, before I could.

She seems to have relaxed into her own.

“Chairman .....

Chairman Tsukimitsu silently shows up at my side with a very satisfied smile on his face.

Of course, there’s an association staff member leading him. He wouldn’t be out walking around by himself.

“Well done, Ryuo. How in the world is it that one can create such a difference between morning and afternoon sessions of a Shogi match?”

He’s talking about Ryuo.

“I’m ... not sure. I didn’t do anything special ..... Just talked with her for a bit.”

Maybe Ai’s adjustments to her kimono made the difference?

“Ah, yes ..... Being able to draw this level of Shogi skill out of her with a few well-chosen words is an ability fitting of a someone who has already raised players to Women’s League members in such a short amount of time like yourself.”

The chairman nods several times as if thoroughly impressed.

Being complimented like this makes me feel like maybe I have a gift for this *teaching* thing. It’s really weird .....

Then again, both the Ai’s have talent that blows everyone else their age out of the water.

“If I may ask, what are your plans for Match Three tomorrow?” asks the chairman.

There won’t be any dramatic comebacks this time.

Everyone, including the players, knows it.

The media people have started writing their pieces for the final match and the staff have started their preparations as well.

I take a moment to think it over and answer the chairman.

“I haven’t decided anything yet, but I would like to see the match if I can.”

“Then, why don’t I arrange for an extra room to be prepared at our hotel? In exchange, I would like for you and Miss Hinatsuru to provide commentary.”

“Yes. I’d be glad to.”

Players visiting title matches are almost duty bound to help out in some way.

Going back to Osaka wouldn’t take that long, but the best way to truly get a feel for a title match’s vibe is to stay on site.

“Ai, you want to stay here too, right?”

“Huh? I, um .....

She doesn’t know how to answer.

The match is still going on, but we’re making plans like it’s already over ..... Machi has done a lot for Ai since she came to Kansai, so she might be refusing to acknowledge our verdict right off the bat.

But, *sympathy* and *competition* are two separate things.

She needs to make absolutely sure to separate them.

That’s what makes competition so cutthroat. If she can’t weather this kind of emotional pressure, she’ll never claim a title. No chance.

“Ai. What are you going to do? Go home by yourself?”

“..... No. I will stay with you, Master .....

Then, the very moment she squeezes those words out of her throat .....

“I am defeated.”

Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui—throws in the towel.

Victory stars even at one apiece, the battle is back to square one.



“The press conference shall now get underway.”

After the match.

This is normally when review sessions would happen, but players in the Yamashiro Ouka title match move to a different room to talk to the press first.

Ai and I find a spot in the back of the room to watch for our own future reference.

Someone representing Kyoto City journalists asks questions from within the wall of media people.

“First, I would like to speak with the victor of today’s match, challenger Tsukiyomizaka-*women’s king*. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“I believe we can all agree that today’s win was a convincing victory.”

“Yeah.”

“A far cry from the first match ..... No, even from this morning. The change was so dramatic, it was almost as though someone else was playing. What was the secret to your turnaround?”

“..... You sayin’ I cheated or something?”

“Not in the least, because I know that’s impossible. I’m simply inquiring into what you specifically did during the lunch recess to spark your comeback.”

“I had a guy over.”

“..... You what?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I had a guy over to give me a *spark*. The food was terrible so I had to have fun somehow, don’t you think?”

*Whisper, whisper, whisper .....*

No one was expecting such a lewd response. The media people are talking to each other in hushed voices while association staff are going red in the face.

“Yeah, Kuzu the trash heap—Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo brought that grade schooler apprentice of his into my room and the three of us lived it up. Oh yeah, Kuzu’s small fry of an apprentice is darn good at retying *obis*. I’ll have her do it again tomorrow. End of story.”

Ryou shuts down the interview out of the blue and glances my way with a twinkle in her eye and lips curled into a grin.

Well, she isn’t lying.

She did demand that I *entertain her*, and I did my best to fill that request by digging into my stock of stories and telling one. The three of us did have a good time, that’s true.

It’s also true that Ai adjusted her kimono.

But, putting it like that ..... It sounds like *we* were the reason her kimono got messed up in the first place!!

“..... Ai. Go walk around in the garden for a bit.”

“Uwhee?”

Though confused, Ai does what she’s told and leaves the room.

The media will eat her alive after the interview if I don’t get her out of here right now ..... More to the point, she’s such an honest girl that she’ll say every little detail ..... Misunderstandings will pile up into one big disaster .....

“W-Well then ..... Kugui-Yamashiro Ouka, may we proceed with your interview?”

An association staff member must have sensed the impending danger and steps in to change the subject. The Kyoto journalist clears his throat and starts asking questions again.

“This match certainly didn’t end as you had hoped it would.”

“The early game went swimmingly, but sequences broke down from the mid-game onward.”

“The match transformed into one ill-suited for your preferred strategy, the *anaguma*.”

“In the face of such ruthless play, I had no choice but to submit. Now, I must acknowledge my opponent’s skill and shift my mindset to focus on tomorrow.”

“That match will decide the title. Are you confident you can defend it?”

“From a record standpoint, the two of us stand on equal footing. Though, from a *home and away* perspective, I possess the advantage. As this will be a match out in public, I plan to harness the energy of my supporters to play at a level beyond my normal capabilities.”

“What would you like to say to all of your supporters in Kyoto?”

“I wholeheartedly believe the Yamashiro Ouka title should not leave Kyoto’s borders. Yamashiro Ouka does not belong in the hands of one born outside Tokyo’s urban core. For if it did, the name would need to be changed to Asakusa Kagetsu, would it not? The association need not go through such a hassle.”

The room fills with laughter for the first time.

I can tell Machi is used to these press conferences, making sure everyone leaves with a smile on their face. She’s already processed the damage from this loss and moved on.

Looking around the press conference ..... It would seem that Ryou’s attempt to take a big slice out of Machi’s heart missed its mark.

However, the two players never looked at each other once during the entire press conference.



“Nghh ..... That vibe was horrible.”

Claiming that I needed to run to the men’s room as an excuse to get out of that press conference, I bump into a familiar face in the hall.

“Ms. Oga.”

“Yes. It is one.”

Rather than her usual suit, she’s wearing a fancy kimono.

What’s more, I barely recognize her without her glasses. She must be wearing contacts right now.

But, her choice of words makes it plainly obvious that she’s Sasari Oga.

“Great job out there today. It’s been a while since you’ve worked as a match recorder, hasn’t it?”

“It has indeed. I was quite nervous.”

Since players in training and Women’s League members are required to work as match recorders for league matches, Ms. Oga knows how to do them even though she works for the association now.

But, a lot has changed since she was active. Tablets are much more widespread, time management works differently and many smaller things don’t work the way they used to.

Match recorders might look like they’re just sitting around during matches, but their job is actually really difficult.





Furthermore, even though players can get up from the board to use the restroom and whatnot, match recorders pretty much have to stay board-side and maintain perfect posture throughout the whole match.

I'm sure that Ms. Oga was *quite nervous* today.

—It's too bad she has to go through it all again tomorrow .....

Match recording is like intensive training for players in training and Women's League members, but Ms. Oga doesn't have to get stronger anymore.

Thinking I'd help her relax a bit, I tease her.

"Oh, I heard you moaned and groaned about being the match recorder for the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match when the chairman asked you."

"....."

I thought she'd have a snappy comeback, but—.

She silently stares at her feet as tears started building in her eyes. Huuh?!!

"S-Sorry! Sorry, I'm so sorry!!"

I jump in to comfort Ms. Oga as she starts crying her heart out. Then concerned staff members who came to investigate start whispering back and forth.

"The Ryuo made another young lady cry ....."

"The challenger said somethin' *weird* went down with him in her break room over lunch at the press conference."

"First grade schoolers, now young adults ..... I heard the Ryuo was one of them lolicon guys."

"He probably just wants to knock up some young ladies to get more younger ones."

"Sounds about right."

“Somebody heard him talking about *livestock* a little bit ago.”

“That settles it.”

There are some *weird* misunderstandings going around in Kyoto!!

“M-Ms. Oga! Please, stop crying .....!”

“Wahhha ..... *Hic!* B-But ..... But .....!”

“If you’re worried about the chairman, he told me that *things just don’t feel right without you around!*”

“..... Eh-hehe≡”

The tears are gone!! And that was kinda cute .....

She really must have a thing for the chairman.

I don’t get many chances like this, so I decide to ask her how they met.

“If I can ask, Ms. Oga, how long have you and the chairman been together?”

“T-Together ..... Well, being officially together is still somewhere down the road, but .....≡”

“No, no. That’s not what I meant.”

She’s still got her head in the clouds.

“Your Master was Sakai 9-*dan* ..... My Master and Chairman Tsukimitsu’s Master’s last apprentice, right? I know that the chairman became your guardian after Sakai 9-*dan* passed away. Did you know him before you joined that Shogi family?”

Should someone’s Master die while they’re still in training, some players decide to find a new one while others keep the first Master’s name as is and have someone else, a guardian, fill that role.

Ms. Oga did the latter.

The thing is that the Sakai Shogi tree is huge, and the chairman is a busy man.

Considering he was willing to take up a guardian position, there has to be another connection there somewhere .....

It turns out my instincts were right on the money.

“One’s grandfather was the leader of the chairman’s——Meijin Seiichi Tsukimitsu at the time——fan club. He still represents the club today.”

“Ah, the fan club’s president.”

“He also works as a representative for the Kyoto Shogi Promotion Federation and is also in charge of one of its branches ... though his main occupation is owning and operating a drugstore.”

In other words, he’s a staple of Kyoto’s amateur Shogi scene.

Most likely, he’s directly involved with the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match. I don’t blame Chairman Tsukimitsu for giving her an opportunity in the spotlight.

..... Not that that person was particularly happy to get it.

“So, you’ve known the chairman for a long time then?”

“But of course. He was present for one’s birth.”

Now that I think about it, the chairman would’ve not only been an active player, but he also had the Meijin title around the time Ms. Oga was born.

Surely, he would have met the family of his own fan club’s president and would have been close enough to them to be invited to a special event like that.

“Oh, I see. But, there’s no way you remember that, right?”

“Quite clearly, actually.”

Come again .....

“How could one ever forget the first day she was held in the chairman’s arms? While one does not remember the temperature of her first bath, one shall never forget the warmth within his arms.”

“Uhhh ..... what? You remember ..... being born .....?”

“In that moment, one knew. *Ahh ..... I was born to be held in this man’s embrace*≡ From that moment on, one has devoted her life to that the great man.”

“.....”

Okay then.

She’s been a bit off since she was born.



“Woow .....! It’s like a festival!”

The Shinkyogoku shopping district.

Ai and I are walking through the streets that follow alongside the Kamo River.

“Ha-ha-ha. There aren’t any flutes or drums in the air, but this vibe is pretty special.”

The temple crowd is spilling out into the streets.

Amidst all this hustle and bustle, there are secondhand clothing shops run by young people, fancy cafés, even anime shops and bookstores that cater to hobbyists scattered all over the place. So there’s something for everyone, no matter who they are, to enjoy.

It’s an everyday thing here, but definitely not normal.

A place where new layers of history are added every day—that’s Kyoto.

“There’s no point heading straight to the hotel from Arashiyama. I doubt we’ll get any time to go sightseeing tomorrow and I think kids your age would enjoy a place like this much more than temples or shrines.”

“Yep!”

Ai nods, takes my hand and rushes into the crowd bubbling with energy.

“I’ve always wanted to come here!”

“Hm? You know about this place?”

“The sixth-graders at my old school always said this place and Kiyomizu Temple were the most fun.”

“Oh ..... Does that mean most kids who grew up in Ishikawa think of Kyoto as the big school field trip?”

“I think so. My school’s sixth-graders came here every year.”

Kyoto is *the* place for special school field trips.

But students who live around Kyoto go someplace else.

“Where did you go, Master, for your big school trip?”

“I was already in Osaka, you see. Students in Osaka usually go to Ise-shima, I think.”

“Ise ..... That’s in Mie Prefecture.”

“The beaches are really nice. Spain Town is fun, too.”

The Toba Aquarium is also worth a visit. Porpoises are cute.

“I’ve always thought of Kyoto or Nara as being the destinations for special school trips, so hearing you went to Mie sounds strange.”

“True, true.” Nodding at my apprentice, I say in a lighter tone, “Well then, let’s think of today as the field trip you never got to go on. Are you having a good time?”

“Yes! The best!”

“But it’d probably be more fun to have your classmates along. I know you transferred here for Shogi training, but it must’ve been pretty tough.”

“T-That’s not true! I was a little sad, leaving all my friends back in Ishikawa,

but ..... I got to go to the same school as Mio, and I made friends with Ayano, Charlette and Ten-chan ..... I'm having more fun now than ever! And this trip is so, so much fun!!" says my apprentice in a continuous burst before looking down and whispering in a tiny voice ...

"It's ..... like, a date ....."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"Hyhaa?! N-Nothing!!"

Her face turns bright red for some reason, and she starts pounding on me with her tiny fists.

Then, she changes the subject to distract me.

"The match tomorrow ..... How do you think it will go, Master?"

"Good question ....."

I cross my arms and look up the sky.

"The third match will start with a peace flip, so it's difficult to plan a strategy ahead of time."

"Because they don't know who will go first, right?"

"Yeah."

For the most part, the offender has the advantage in Shogi because they have the first move.

But the defender has the ability to alter the flow of the match kind of like putting your hand out late in a game of rock paper scissors. So, there's some merit being on defense.

Since the defender using the same strategy as the offender wouldn't be logical, that almost never happens in a match.

After all, you'd be teaching your opponent how to attack your own strategy.

“Then again, those two pretty much always use the same strategies. Machi uses *anaguma* on offense and defense more often than not, and Ryou——.”

“Likes aerial battles ..... Right?”

“Yeah. For the most part.”

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka is really good at Side Pawn Capture and *aigakari* Double Wing Attacks, strategies where the Rook and Bishop fly all over the board in speedy, dynamic fashion.

Speed sends the message *I won't let you make an anaguma*. That's how she's played up until now.

But her play today sent the message *Even if you make an anaguma, I'll still crush you*.

Machi is against the ropes.

“It's hard to prepare commentary when you don't know what formations will be used .....,” says Ai, a bit downtrodden.

“You do have a point. But entertaining the crowd in that situation is where pros really show what they can do.”

Crowds in Kansai are known for interrupting commentators to ask questions and usually they're more interested in funny stories or behind-the-scenes tidbits than in match analysis. They want something more than just high Shogi skill in the commentary——.

“Which reminds me. Remember that big board analysis .....?”

I think back to the day when I provided analysis for my apprentice's Shogi match on a big board in front of a crowd for the first time.

Though, it was a bit different from *normal* commentary——.









“Professional Shogi player.”

If someone were to ask what that job is, the easy answer would be *a person who plays Shogi*.

But, what exactly does *playing Shogi* involve?

Is it participating in league matches?

Is it teaching someone how to play?

A lot of things go into playing Shogi, so there’s a lot of work for Shogi players to do.

At the same time, all that work comes down to one thing: the fans. Without them, the job *Shogi player* wouldn’t exist.

There are pros because there are fans. It’s never the other way around.

Which means the most basic job for Shogi players is *to increase Shogi fandom*.

This is a story about exactly that, the most basic job for a Shogi player.

It took place ..... Yes, about one month after Ai came to Osaka.

A few days after the battle with Big Sis on the *yakiniku* grill, the whole thing started on one sunny morning—.



“Master. It’s morning. Time to wake up.”

Someone’s trying to get me out of my warm and comfortable bed in my room.

—But, who .....?

My name's Yaichi Kuzuryu. I'm a pro Shogi player.

Rather than go to high school after I turned pro in junior high, I moved into my own apartment after being a live-in apprentice and training at my Master's place for many years.

I've been living on my own for almost a full year now, but ..... Someone's calling me *Master* right now for some reason.

And she sounds like a little girl ..... Her voice chirping like a happy little bird.

Which is why, rather than wake me up, those comforting sounds send me off into a deeper sleep .....

"..... Nghh."

"It's nice outside. A beautiful day to play Shogi!"

"Ngghhh ....."

Slowly but surely, I'm starting to wake up.

That's right.

I took an apprentice of my own recently, didn't I?

Not only that, but one who lives with me the same way I lived with my Master for training .....

And that apprentice ..... is a little girl still in grade school—.

"Maaasteeer. Get – out - of – bed! Please – get – up – right - now!"

*Shake, shake.*

Tiny hands rock me back and forth.

I think she's trying to wake me up, but ..... There's no strength there at all, and her little mitts are warm and squishy ..... A nice little massage sending me back to dreamland .....

My apprentice Ai Hinatsuru makes a cute little *oosha* sound as she climbs on

top of me and rocks back and forth using her full body weight.

Ahhh ..... This feeling ..... I could get used to this .....

“..... Five more minutes .....”

“That’s what you always say, and you never can get out of bed!”

Guilty. Sorry about that.

..... But, I can’t help it. Most pro Shogi matches start at 10 in the morning but usually go late into the night.

Also, we just follow standards in the morning, so it doesn’t matter if we’re groggy because there’s still time to fix any mistakes. But, getting sleepy in the late game is the fastest way to lose a match.

That’s why most players are night owls ..... It’s a direct result of our line of work, not an excuse, okay .....? *grumble*.

“*Munch, munch* ..... Keika, you’re so good at making breakfast .....”

“Grr .....”

The hands rocking me back and forth suddenly stop.

Ai’s adorable tippity-tap footsteps leave my room only to come back with those same cute little steps a few moments later.

“Wake up, Master! Breakfast is waiting for you!! The yummy yummy breakfast your apprentice made just for you is getting cold!! Get – up!”

*Clang! Clang! Clang!*

The metallic sound of something metal banging against a frying pan.

She must have brought it from the kitchen. *Clang, clang, clang!*  
*Clangclangclangclang!*

It keeps going for a bit, but——.

“Haaa ..... Haaa ..... Haaa .....”

“..... Zzzz.”

“Grrrr~::~!”

It’s going to take more than a little girl whacking away at a frying pan to spook my stubborn inner night owl.

Suddenly Ai says in a clear, quiet voice, “Kuzuryu-sensei. You are out of waiting time, so please adhere to one-minute Shogi rules for the remainder of the match. 50 seconds. One, two, three, four——.”

“Whaa!!”

*Burst!*

I jump out from my covers, wide awake. This is no time for snoozing!!

“H-how much time is left?!”

“None. Seven, eight, nine——.”

“P-Pieces! Where are the pieces .....!? Uh, 2 Eight Silver!!”

The move should count if I say it out loud when there isn’t time to physically move the piece on the board!

..... But I don’t see my opponent, the match recorder or even a board in front of me where I landed next to my bed.

“Huh? ..... What gives? What about the match .....? T-The one-minute Shogi .....?”

“Good morning≡ Master.”

My apprentice is standing there, looking down at me with a grin and says hello.

“..... Ai, you know .....”

“Ehehe≡”

I give the little prankster a piece of my mind.

“How many times have I told you that countdowns give me a heart attack and not to do that?!”

“Master, you are the one with an important meeting at the association today and told me to get you up no matter what I had to do!”

“Y-Yes, I did say that, but ..... there are other ways to get me up!”

“Such as?”

My apprentice shoots back in her cute little voice and I do my best to squeeze some answers out of my groggy head.

“Well, you could ..... softy rock me back and forth.”

“I did.”

She did, didn’t she .....?

“How about making noise with a frying pan?”

“I did.”

“A wake-up kiss?”

“I did that, too.”

“Huh?! You did?!”

D-Does that mean ..... I’ve been kissed by a grade school girl?!

Isn’t that a crime .....? Then again, the fact that I’m living with a little girl is probably against the law already .....

Just as the fear was sinking in.

“Kidding! I didn’t do that.”

She spins in place before sticking her tongue out at me.

“..... Should’ve known.”

Relief floods through my veins before I could get angry at her. I swear, grade school girls aren’t good for the heart .....

I put my hand on my chest to catch my breath as Ai hides her face behind the frying pan.

“..... That’s for when you’re wide awake .....”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“N-Nothing at all! Master, you *dara*!!”

She’s angry at me .....

By the way, the word *dara* is from Ai’s hometown in Ishikawa Prefecture. It means something along the lines of *idiot* and *piece of crap*. It works in so many ways, so it’s easy to use!

“More importantly, Master, what is going on today?”

Returning to her normal self, Ai pokes her head halfway out from behind the frying pan and asks.

“Oh ..... That.”

I get to my feet and start thinking through today’s schedule.

“I don’t know too much myself. I’m supposed to show up at the association around 10 and talk to some higher-ups.”

“People in charge?”

“Yeah. The chairman’s secretary insisted .....”

The association chairman, Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*, is a top-tier player who holds the title Eternal Meijin.

Since he’s also my Master’s older brother apprentice, you could say there’s no way for me to go against his wishes no matter what.

Not to mention the fact that his secretary, ex-Women’s League 1-*dan* Sasari Oga has so much power and influence of her own that people call her the *Shadow Don*. Being a title holder doesn’t change the fact that I’m a bottom of the barrel pro who’s only played for a little more than a year. I can’t say no to



her either.

It's the weekend.

With Ai going to the association's classroom to play Shogi, as her Master I have no excuse not to go to work, too.

"..... Anyway, let's eat and head to the association together."

"Yes! Master!"

"Good."

Giving my apprentice a cool nod, I gently ask her, "What did you make for breakfast this morning?"

"Curry!"

"Uhh ....."

Will I make it to the association without passing out from spicy deliciousness .....? This morning of thrills has me sweating nonstop .....



It was another day at the Kansai Shogi Association's second floor classroom.

Ai arrived at the association along with Kuzuryu-*sensei*, but the two parted ways as her Master made for the offices on the third floor. It didn't take long for the girl to find her friends in the classroom.

The Grade Schooler Practice Group was composed of four girls, each in elementary school.

Joining Ai was her classmate, Mio Mizukoshi; a girl who lived in nearby Kyoto named Ayano Sadatou and the youngest of the group, the French-born Charlette Isoir.

The four girls were close, often spending nights at Kuzuryu-*sensei*'s apartment

to play Shogi. Despite their young age, each could hold their own on a Shogi board.

They played to their heart's content at the classroom again today.

Then, once they started getting tired of Shogi: "Shogi word chain game!"

Once Mio announced their next activity, "Yay!!" the other three excitedly chimed in.

*Shogi word chain*—a game in which the next word must begin with the last syllable of the previous word. The game ends when one player says a word that ends with the letter *N*.

The challenge was that all words must involve Shogi. Simple enough ..... However, these players possessed extensive knowledge of the game and have been trained to read to several moves ahead. This battle promised to be extremely high caliber!

Mio sent the first sparks of battle flying.

*"Sho gi!"*

The first move of today's Shogi word chain was *Shogi*.

As far as opening moves go, this was as standard as 7 Six Pawn. (Of course, there are times they opt not to employ this opening, but it makes other players' sequences harder to predict, which in turn makes their own next move harder to plan.)

*"Gi! Ummm, gyoku (King)!"* Ai answered in almost no time at all.

*"Ku, ku, ku ..... kuraidori (King's Head Vanguard Pawn advancing a Pawn to 5 Five)!"*

Mio squeezes an evil laugh into her response. In Shogi terms, it was the equivalent of charging forward with Pawns to start the battle as quickly as possible.

“*Ri? Ri*, umm ..... Ehh, umm .....

Ai paused, taking a long moment to think—.

“Ten seconds.”

“Huh?! There’s a time limit?!”

“It’s a 30-second Shogi word chain game,” Mio answered flatly and continued counting down the seconds.

Suddenly under pressure, Ai started wracking her brain at a furious pace.

Ayano stepped in to offer advice with time quickly slipping away a moment later.

“Ai. Master. Your Master.”

“Ah! *Ryuo* (Dragon King)! *Ryuo’s uo*!”

“*Uchifu dume* (Pawn Drop Mate).”

“*Meriken mukai bisha* (American Opposing Rook)!”

“*Sha?* Hmm ..... *Shagami yagura* (Squatting *Yagura*)!”

“Huuuh? What’s that? Is that real?”

“It is. It’s the same as the *Kikusui Yagura*.”

Charlette did her best to follow Ai and Mio’s back-and-forth argument but sought help from Ayano by tugging on her sleeve.

“*Kiwqu suui yaara?*”

“Silver at 8 Eight, Knight at 7 Seven, with the King surrounded at 8 Nine.”

“Ohh .....?”

Charlette, with her lower *kyu* ranking and less-than-perfect grasp of the Japanese language, could only tilt her head in confusion despite having the formation described to her.

As for the game, Ai was still trying to find a response.

“*Ra, ra, ra* ..... Uwhhee? Is there one?”

Just as she was about to give up, Mio offered a hint.

“Sure there is. Like a stamp? A little s-t-a-m-p?”

“Whaaa?”

“What all the professional *Senseis* use when they sign autographs.”

“.....?”

Ai had seen her Master writing on square pieces of thick paper before and raced to recall all the details. Yes, there was something undeniably cool about her Master at work ..... And other meaningless thoughts crossed her mind before the answer shown through like a beacon.

“Ah! *Rakkan!*”

“That ends with *N*, so you lost, Ai.”

Only then did the indignation of falling into her opponent’s trap truly set in.

“..... Arggh!! No fair, Mio! You made me say it!”

“Muh-ha-ha! The world of competition is an unforgiving place, trainee Ms. Ai Hinatsuru.”

“Okay then. It looks like it’s going to be really hard to join the Women’s League .....”

Ai had jumped headfirst into the Shogi world only recently.

Apparently, she still had much to learn.

Ayano offered some comforting words.

“While I believe Shogi skill and word games have nothing to do with each other, losing is something you want to avoid no matter what you play.”

“For sure! My Master always tells me, *Be the best at everything you do!*”

“You’re even the fastest at eating lunch in our class, Mio,” Ai said with a grin.

Though happy at first, Mio's face turned dark mere seconds later.

"But I get too sure of myself playing Shogi and I end up losing in a flash. I've got to stay cool like you and Ayano if I'm going to get my winning percentage up ....."

"Shogi is a game of turning the tide."

Ayano regularly spoke with a deeper meaning behind her words.

Ai solemnly added, "The other day, I was playing against Master and lost to a One Step Checkmate at the very end ....."

"Instant death!"

"Inswant dweth!"

Mio giddily squeaked and Charlette mimicked her.

Ai put her hand to her chest and said, "I just get so anxious when I'm about to win, my heart beats so fast ....."

"Don't you mean to say," Mio interjects as she peeks up at Ai's face from below, "you always get butterflies whenever you sit across the board from Kuzuryu-sensei?"

"N-no I don't! ..... I'm used to it now ....."

"Speaking of Kuzuryu-sensei, why did he come to the association today? He doesn't have a match or practice group, right?"

"Master didn't sound like he knew much about it himself ..... Something about the chairman's secretary? She wanted to talk to him ....."

Ayano and Mio froze at the mere mention of the *chairman* and exchanged concerned glances.

"Did he do something bad?"

"Could it be that, maybe, you living with him is a problem after all?"

“Whaaat?! W-What am I supposed to do then?!”

Ai’s skin was losing color fast, but Mio couldn’t pass up this opportunity and said with a grin.

“I mean, think about it. You two are living like mixed roommates, right?”

Charlette’s puffy cheeks tilted to the side.

“Mwixed woommates?”

“Unmarried men and women living together.”

Ayano’s explanation made Ai’s entire face flush red.

“I-I’m a live-in apprentice! Roommates ... we’re not like ..... Hehee≡”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for the juicy story.”

Mio had gotten used to Ai’s quirks in the weeks they had known each other and let that pass.

Speaking calmly, Ayano asked, “All joking aside, why is he here today?”

“A job request, maybe? I mean, he’s the Ryuo. Surely they want him to do commentary for a title match or to be on TV.”

“All commentators for the Meijin Title Match this year have been announced.”

“Then it’s got to be the Mynavi Queen Title Match! The Queen right now is Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s older sister apprentice, right? He can give more details than anyone else.”

“A good point. As the two have lived under one roof for ten years, they must have many stories and know many secrets about one another.”

“Dragon King and the Queen. It’s like a perfect set!”

“Very true!”

The two girls shared a nod before Ayano asked a sullen Ai, “If I may, Ai. Why

are you in such a bad mood?”

“I’m not in a bad mood. I’m not in a bad mood at all!”

Ai puffed out her cheeks like rice cakes and snapped back at Ayano, denying her observation on no uncertain terms.

That’s when Mio saw her chance to put the nail in the coffin.

“Which reminds me. Ai, I saw the two of them eating together at the restaurant downstairs the day you came back to Osaka. They looked like they were having a great time, sitting side-by-side!”

“..... Master *darabuchi* .....”

Ai’s mood was indeed plummeting from bad to worse.

It was then, at the worst possible time, that Kuzuryu-*sensei* walked into the classroom.



“What was that about me?”

Finishing up at the office, I came down to the classroom to find my apprentice and her friends having a rather intense conversation.

I’m pretty sure I heard my name come up .....

“Masta!”

The happy little girl trying to climb up my leg is the youngest of the group, Charlette.

“Uwhee?! N-Nothing! We haven’t said a word about you!!”

Ai panics, denying things before I can ask questions.

Why? What’s got her so worked up?

“.....Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Masta, hug!”

“Okay, okay. Up you go .....”

Charlette pleads, so I pick her up and hold her with both arms.

“Huuug≡”

Wrapping her arms around my neck, her squishy cheek presses up against mine.

It’s so soft and warm, like a little marshmallow. Kids are the best .....≡

Wait, no, no! This is no time to get distracted.

For I was just assigned a next-to-impossible mission only a few moments ago in the office——.

“Oh, Mio and Ayano are here, too. Can I talk to both of you for a minute?”

“S-Sure!’

“Yes.”

Both girls, the same age as Ai, stand up straight and answer right away. They’re members of the Practice League and in Shogi training, so they show the same respect for me as they would for a teacher.

“Cha’s here twoo?”

“That you are. Okay, would you listen, too?”

“Wei!”

Putting Charlette back down on the floor, I turn to face the four girls at once.

Ai takes it on herself to ask questions for the group.

“Master. What did that secretary want you to do?”

“Yeah. That’s what I was going to talk about .....”



I clear my throat and pause for dramatic effect—.

“All of you ..... are going to be Junior Shogi idols!”

I say.

“Junior ..... Shogi idols?”

Just as I thought, their minds all scrambling to understand a word they’ve never heard like someone’s using a strategy they’d never seen before. I can see it in their eyes ..... Well, basically it’s a *What are you talking about?* kind of look.

Ai says, somewhat coolly, “Master. What’s that?”

“Yeah, well ..... There are still some parts that I don’t understand myself, but .....”

Ms. Oga laid out the astonishing plan for me back in the office.

Now I have to explain it all in a way that grade schoolers can understand.

I haven’t even had time to process everything .....

“..... You all know that Shogi’s gotten pretty popular recently, right? People are calling it the *Shogi boom*.”

“Yes. I’ve seen professional *Senseis* on TV quite a bit lately,” says Mio right away in her usual *ball of energy* style. Ayano adds her own insight to further clarify the situation.

“I have heard that *Shogi-watching fans* are increasing.”

Ai tilts her head, confused.

Considering she’s only been playing Shogi for four months, she probably hasn’t heard that term before.

“Shogi-watching fans?”

“Rather than playing Shogi themselves, watching fans enjoy watching pros play and follow their favorite players’ activities. It’s like how people go to sporting events just to watch. We call them *watchers* for short.”

“Huh?! What’s so fun about Shogi if you don’t get to play?”

“Actually, watching makes me want to play it even more.”

Ai sounds totally surprised and Mio agrees with her.

These two are the textbook player type ..... Of course they’d have that reaction because they’re *Shogi playing fans*.

Even pros have trouble accepting Shogi fans who *never play Shogi*. Since those people are in the minority, I think it’s fair to say it’s more fun to play, but—.

“The fact that they are not the only ones shows that the number of Shogi fans is increasing.”

“Just as Ayano said, there are more ways to enjoy Shogi now than ever.”

I count them on my fingers.

“People spend whole days watching title matches on the Internet, play Shogi on their smartphones, read about it in manga or books—.”

“Cha learn Showgi in manga!”

Yep, yep.

Born in France, Charlette first found out about Shogi from the manga *Naruto*. From watching title matches to clearly unrelated things like that, there are many ways to get into Shogi.

For example, the people who grew up watching the anime *Hikaru no Go* are actually more familiar with how to play Go than they are with Shogi.

Ayano says, “It seems that the number of children in foreign countries who are learning how to play Shogi like Charlette is also increasing. The Shogi boom

is happening all over the world!”

She’s right.

Unlike decades ago, the Shogi world is looking up.

It was looking like video games would spell doom for the sport for a while, but some

schools have started using it in classes once it came out that playing Shogi makes kids smarter.

The driving force behind all of it is, of course, the man who stood at the top of the Shogi world for many years: the Meijin.

That’s not to say Women’s League players who rock their own style and have the looks to pull it off like Naniwa’s Snow White and the Aggressive Archangel aren’t major influences as well.

“Unfortunately, the attention is going to Kanto so we here in Kansai aren’t feeling the boom at all. That’s something the Kansai Association higher-ups are trying to fix.”

Let me explain.

While there is only one Shogi Association, it has two separate branches east and west.

They are the Kanto Shogi Association located in Sendagaya, Tokyo, and the Kansai Association here in Osaka’s Fukushima Ward.

Shogi players have to choose one to serve as their *main* arena.

Go with the one in Tokyo and become registered as a *Kanto* player. People who choose to play Osaka become registered as *Kansai players*. Of course, I’m Kansai.

The thing is that most newspapers and TV stations are in Tokyo. So all the TV spots and newspaper articles usually go to Kanto players.

Which means that Kanto players are the ones getting famous and all the fans on the bandwagon who want to meet big-name players go to Tokyo .....

“Now that I think about it, there weren’t all that many people in the classroom today. Nobody got angry at us for playing Shogi word games,” says Mio as she glances around the room.

Ai, still looking confused, adds, “But, Master. What does that have to do with us becoming idols?”

“Basically, the higher-ups have decided that the best way to get a Kansai Shogi boom going is to form a group of grade-school-aged idols who are all trying to join the Women’s League.”

“Okaaay.”

The lightbulb really isn’t coming on for my apprentice.

Not that it did for me either, but I absolutely cannot let her know that. I keep going, trying to convince myself just as much as the girls.

“Just imagine how much coverage we’d get if a group of cute girls playing Shogi were to get famous. We’d have the TV crews and journalists coming in and out of here all the time. Think of all the publicity!”

“Like how everyone was rushing to see pandas at the zoo!”

“It sounds like a good plan.”

Everything clicks for Mio and Ayano in the blink of an eye.

Grade schoolers sure are sharp these days .....

“..... The higher-ups have already made up their minds. Please .....”

It takes everything I have to get those words out.

The discussion in the office ..... No, that wasn’t a discussion. More like a lecture before receiving orders.

Ms. Oga knows so much about the association’s inner workings that people

are actually scared of her enough to call her the *Shadow Don*.

With the stockpile of secrets she's built up over the past few years as a shield, no one can go against that woman .....

Despite all my fears, the girls seem pretty receptive to the idea.

"Well, we're already trying to join the Women's League, right? Why not? Let's try!"

"I have no objections."

"I will too, if that's what Master wants me to do ....."

"Cha'll be an idowu!"

"Thank you .....! Everyone, thank you .....!"

I'm all tears at this point.

All the relief and gratitude flooding through me blocks my train of thought, so Mio took it from there.

"Well then, we'd better figure this out first!"

"Figure what out?" asks Ayano with an inquisitive look, but Mio answers like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"Our name! Our unit needs a name! Nothing can start without a name, right?! Don't you think so, Charlette?"

"Wei!"

Mio nods at Charlette before turning to me with sparkles in her eyes and says, "Kuzuryu-sensei! Does our unit already have a name?!"

"W-Well ..... Yeah, there is already one in place, but ....."

I trail off.

I'm worried that telling these girls what the office came up with for the group name might kill their enthusiasm.

Ai timidly speaks up.

“It’s something like *SOG81*, right?!”

“It’s ..... Uh, a bit more, you know ... dignified I guess.”

“Dignified .....? Ah! Something like *GOD 8 Four Pawn*, isn’t it?!”

“Not quite like that——.”

She’s right that the defender playing 8 Four Pawn, a strategy called the *King’s Fist*, is a dignified strategy. As for the GOD part, no comment.

Then again, the idea of *dignified* when it comes to Shogi strategies is extremely abstract and there wouldn’t be enough pages in the world to try and explain it in further detail so I’m just going to let that pass.

“So, perhaps we are *Team Bishop Exchange 4th File Rook*?”

“Oh! *Static Rook Party and Mio and Friends!*”

“I-It’s got ..... more to do with Kansai.”

Ayano, who plays Ranging Rook strategies, and Mio, a member of the Static Rook party, each suggest names they would like, but unfortunately neither are right.

The key word here is *Kansai*.

Charlette comes up to me and starts tugging on my shirt as if asking for a clue to a brainteaser.

“Kanshy?”

“A unit name that has to do with Shogi, is dignified, and also involves Kansai? Hmm .....”

Mio is thinking so hard that her head tilts all the way down to her shoulder, pinning hair in place.

Then.

*Mumble .....* Ai says something.

“..... *Glico Gleaming Girls ...*”

“Hey!”

We can't use that?!

“Uwhee?! D-Did I say something strange?”

“I don't know why, but I just had to point it out!”

All of the girls take shots at Ai when all she was trying to do was innocently try to awaken Kansai Shogi's first legendary unit.

“Come on, Kuzuryuu-sensei! What's our name?! Just tell us, please!”

Mio breaks through the awkward vibe.

She's right. There's no point drawing it out any longer.

“..... Your group name will be .....”

“Please be good, please be good .....”!

With all their piercing gazes locked onto me, I tell the grade schoolers.

“..... *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street!*”

Ai makes a stunned noise.

“Uhh .....”?

Uh-huh. Yep.

That's the same reaction I had.

“Naniwa Street .....

“It's a play on words, with an actual *street* and *way*.”

No light bulbs are flickering on for Mio and Ayano, either. Charlette seems to

be having trouble understanding the words themselves, so she doesn't know what to say.

Ai asks another question to try and figure things out.

"Master. Why was that name chosen?"

"..... The higher-ups made the decision, not me."

I don't think it's a good name at all to tell the truth.

But what can I do about it? I was told that's the name, so that's what we're going to go with!

"You can't win against authority!"

Mio hits the nail right on the head.

"Well, I'm sure we all have our own ideas, but ..... But! Let's do our best for Kansai Shogi!"

"Yeah!"

Well said!

We might have empty piece stands when it comes to being idols, but ..... That doesn't mean the pieces we have can't move forward. Things will work out as long as we all work together!

I pose a question to everyone.

"So, do any of you have any talents?"

"Shogi."

"Shogi."

"I can play Shogi."

"Yes. That's true. I should've figured."

Shogi is all these girls do.

"Cha can do Wanging Wook!"



“And that’s great. But, that’s also Shogi.”

“Ooh?”

Charlette’s attempt at a self-intro falls flat and now she looks a bit sad.

That’s when it happens.

“Master .....

Ai speaks up, sounding like she put a lot of thought into this.

“Actually ..... I can do impressions!”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

Who knew this girl had a hidden talent like that?! I sure didn’t!

“Hey-hey! You *did* grow up in an inn!”

“I would love to see your funniest impression, Ai!”

Mio and Ayano start slowly clapping in unison.

What Mio said is true, Ai grew up as the only daughter at a Japanese-style inn with an *onsen* hot spring. She’s in line to take over as the manager. And her mother and current manager was strict with her so she could become just that.

There’s a pretty good chance she taught her how to entertain as well .....!

“Okay ..... A-hem. Here I go!”

“Yaaay!”

Ai clears her throat and starts getting into it. The tension is building up and we can’t wait!

“I’ll do an impression!”

“Yaaay!”

“A Shogi Wars impression!”

“Yaaay!”

“Craaab Castle!”

“.....”

All of us watching her are at a loss for words like she just splashed us with cold water.

The Crab Castle is a strategy ..... And that pose has some impact, but .....

“What’s wrong?”

My (very confident) apprentice is standing there with her hands over her head making *scissors* with her fingers like an actual crab and I waste no time encouraging her.

“So cute! Full score!!”

“Squee≡ I love you, Master!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Why don’t we stop by Dohtonbori to eat some crab on the way home?!”

“Crwabby!”

My little crab is adorable. I could just eat her up.

“Cha, mwitten cwab!”

Charlette strikes the same crab pose before taking hold of my leg. I’ll go bankrupt buying mitten crab. But, yeah, they’re cute, so I’ll treat everyone!

Mio and Ayano seem a lot less enthusiastic and say coldly, “Enough with the Master-apprentice comedy routine. We need to find real talents other than Shogi if we are going to make it as idols.”

“I agree. Let’s be serious.”

“Huh?! B-But, I was being serious .....

Ai is genuinely shocked. Looks like she needs to increase her repertoire.



Now then, how exactly can one be an idol?

Several ideas came up about it.

Unfortunately, all of us really only know the ins and outs of Shogi. Since 99 percent of our brains are devoted to it, being asked to come up with something else out of the blue is very hard.

Just when we were all out of ideas, “You know? Wouldn’t the fastest way to figure out how to become an idol be asking a real one?” says a frustrated Mio, on the verge of giving up like a bored kid.

Heh! Heh! Heh!

Reading what will happen next is what a pro Shogi player like me does.

I saw this coming.

Which is why I prepared an ace in the hole .....! All the conversation up to this point was just to stall for time .....!!

“I invited a special guest to speak with all the members of *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street!*”

“Ohhh!”

“When it comes to Shogi idols, she’s the one!”

I yell and point to the doorway where the person who sent me a message saying, “I’m here,” not two minutes ago should come through at any second.

“Naniwa’s Snow White, Ginko Sora-*dual title!* Right this way please!”

“..... Thank you.”

And, with perfect timing, Big Sis makes her entrance.

Unsure why everyone’s so excited, she looks a little scared. Well, I didn’t exactly say *why* I wanted her to come.

“The Queen is here!”

“Genuine! A genuine idol is right in front of us!”

These girls can’t handle any more excitement.

Mio and Ayano are thrilled to meet the double Women’s Title–holding player they admire so much.

To think they were running on fumes just a second before she got here .....

“You’re the best, Big Sis! Naniwa’s Snow White never lets me down! You can ensnare the hearts of grade schoolers just by showing up!!”

Big Sis hides half her face behind her fan and says, “..... I’ve never once referred to myself as *Naniwa’s Snow White* or an *idol* at any time .....

“Did everyone hear that?! This is what I’m talking about! What Sora-sensei is saying is that idols don’t have to do anything to make other people believe they’re special! Wow, the real ones *feel* different. They’re in a whole league of their own.”

“This is annoying, so can I go?”

“Come on, Big Sis, can’t you take a jok——?”

“Please, go right ahead. You can go anywhere you want, we don’t mind at all.”

Before I could pacify Big Sis, my apprentice Ai jumps in.

*Tsk!* Big Sis snaps her tongue and stares down at her with the chilling glare that has to be somewhere around absolute zero and spits, “..... Run along, Pipsqueak.”

“Why would I, Auntie?”

Ai, don’t pick a fight!!

“Okay, okay, okay, let’s just cool our jets. Both of you need to respect boundaries and give each other space, okay? Get too close and you’ll explode.”

“Huh? What are you talking about, Yaichi? I don’t even see Pipsqueak around.”

Not to be outdone, Ai fires right back.

“You’re the one who shouldn’t get too close to Auntie, Master!! You’re forbidden to get within 200 meters of her!”

“How would I play against her?!”

“You don’t need to!”

Watching our Shogi family squabble from a safe distance, each member of the Grade School Practice Group has their own thoughts.

“..... You know something? Watching Ai stand right up to Sora-*sensei* like this makes me think beating her in a match is hopeless .....,” Mio remarks.

“She certainly has what it takes to be a competitor,” adds Ayano.

“Cha, Cha wants to pway Shogi with the Quween!” Charlette, happy to see Big Sis for the first time in a while, says with glee.

I tell her as gently as possible, “Now Charlette, the Queen won’t be playing Shogi today. She’s here to teach you how to sing and dance.”

“Wanna sing!”

Now she’s even more excited.

Even more annoyed, Big Sis says, “What? I won’t sing, ever.”

“The higher-ups already decided .....,”

“Do you even have a song ready? Where are we going to perform?”

“Well, the projected plan they gave me has us performing our debut song on national TV on the New Year’s show Kohaku, but .....,”

“Going to have them show off their lungs by singing *Oushou King* at some neighborhood singing competition, are you?” says Big Sis, almost snickering

through her nose.

By the way, that song is based on a Shogi player who lived here in Kansai. It was a smash hit back in the day.

Many people say it helped promote the sport by telling the story of all the hardships that he and his wife faced, but the song turns so dark in some places that others say it hurt Shogi's image rather than helped.

..... Well, idols wouldn't sing it anyway.

In other words, Big Sis is making fun of me. Just because I'm being too modest ..... Just because Shogi fans like her more ..... Come on, Big Sis, put yourself in my shoes why don't you .....?!

While the pain I'm in gets completely ignored, "I think it'd be more fun to perform on Namba Grand Kagetsu's stage rather than on TV at Kohaku," (says Mio).

"Shogi comedy sounds like fun," Ayano agrees.

Seems like Mio and Ayano would rather form a comedy duo than sing. There's a comedy boom going on, too. I don't blame them.

"Want to give it a shot?"

"I'll give it a try."

"I'm Miiiiiio!"

"Ayano."

"And together we are——."

"*Mirror Match!*"

Okay, here we go .....

"Sketch: *Ranging Rook.*"

As soon as Ayano finishes announcing the title, Mio puts her hands together

like offering up a prayer and says, “Time to be worldly! I’m going to be worldly today! ..... *Snap, snap, snap, snap, snap!*”

“You’re the match recorder!”

.....

“Well?” asks Mio expectantly.

“Moving on, we need to figure out what to do for the debut song——.”

“What?! Not even a giggle?!” Mio interrupts me.

I was trying to be nice and let that slide on by like it never happened, but Mio seems to think I ignored the joke she put her heart and soul into making. Ah, kids .....

“Cha? Cha didn’t get it .....”

“Basically, it’s funny because the title Ranging Rook and using the word *worldly* makes the audience to think of a player, but it turns out to be the match recorder doing a piece flip. Though I’m not sure if I’m right.”

“??? Ohh?”

Charlette is still looking confused as ever and Ai’s explanation was total overkill. My apprentice is starting to scare me.

Even Ayano says, “It appears that the road to comedy stardom is even harsher than Shogi .....!” with a tremor in her voice.

Well, we figured out that idols need to have a song!

“We can come up with lyrics ourselves. It’s the music that’s a problem,” I say, crossing my arms and giving it some thought before bringing up my idea.

“Big Sis, as Naniwa’s Snow White, do you think you could get in contact with *Naniwa’s Mozart?*”

“Why do I have to be the one to ask Taro K-sensei? I’ve never met him.”

“You’ve both got the *Naniwa* part .....

“Want your head on a pike?”

Taro K has served as a consultant for many years on the hit late-night show *Detective! Night Scoop!* here in Kansai. I was thinking that if he would be willing to write some music for us, that alone would be enough publicity to draw a crowd .....

“All right, then. We’ll plan on not having a song——.”

“Whaaat?! How can we be idols without a song?!”

“Without one, we are simply elementary school students who play Shogi .....

Mio is obviously against the idea and Ayano gets right to the heart of the matter.

“What do you want me to do about it? Asking a pro to write will cost lots of money. The Kansai Association doesn’t have the kind of money Kanto has to work with .....,” I trail off.

“Ai. Work your magic, work your magic.”

Mio nudges Ai’s side with her elbow and whispers in her ear.

My apprentice then looks at me and says like a cute little kitten, “Master. I wanna sing≡”

“Then I guess there’s no choice. I’ll use the 5 million yen I won from the Ryuo Title Match to——.”

“Wake up.”

*Smack!*

Big Sis whacks the back of my head with her fan just as I was reaching for my wallet.

“Ow! W-What was that for, Big Sis?!”



“Spoiling her.”

“Huuuh? How so? I’ll have you know I’m very strict with her. Right, Ai?”

“Yes! Master is very, very strict!”

“See?”

“But, he’s also the nicest in the world!!”

“My apprentice is the most respectful in the world!!!”

“Ehehe≡”

I pick up my apprentice and spin her around for everyone in the classroom to see. She holds her arms out like an airplane, loving every second.

I’ve been working her as hard as possible while being scared she might hate me for it, but ..... I’m so glad she understands how I feel! I’m so happy! There’s nothing ..... to be scared of anymore .....!!

As for Big Sis, “Stupid Yaichi ..... You are an embarrassment to the whole Shogi family ..... Drop dead .....”

Apparently, she’s jealous of the Kuzuryu Shogi Family’s strong bonds. Good grief.

Still up in the air in my grasp, Ai tilts her head and asks, “So, what are we going to do for our debut song?”

“Thinking about it logically, we’d never finish one in time even if we started writing it now. The debut stage is already booked for Sunday.”

“That’s tomorrow!”

Mio lets out the biggest squeal of surprise yet today as Ayano turns to me so fast her glasses nearly fly off her face to ask, “Wh-why did you agree to such a demanding schedule?!”

“The higher-ups made the call .....”

“Yaichi, stop using that as an excuse for anything and everything.”

Ignoring Big Sis’s comment for the time being.

“The problem is, how are we going to get people to come?”

“M-Master ..... I think there are plenty more problems than that .....”

Even with my precious apprentice taking shots at me in the most hopeless of situations, I’m not giving up.

After all, I am the Dragon King Ryuo, Yaichi Kuzuryu.

Carrying on the Kansai tradition of gritty, dragged through the mud but never say die Shogi, I’m one man who doesn’t throw in the towel .....!

“First off, we’ll add special coupons to the concert tickets——.”

“For a handshake, meet and greet event?”

“Nah, for an instructional match. We are trying to increase the number of Shogi fans, remember?”

After answering Mio’s question, I hear.

“Just how many matches must we play .....?”

Ayano’s face goes pale.

“I’ll just die from being dead-tired if 1,000 people show up .....”

Mio’s already tired as it is.

Thinking I’ll put their fears to rest, I recount my own experience.

“Well, no one would expect you to play against 1,000 people. Big Sis and I played against 500 at once a while back and that was rough to say the least.”

“500 at the same time?!”

“How did you line up that many boards?!”

Memories she’d rather not relive going through her head, Big Sis explains.

“Boards were set up in a square at the Osaka Castle Hall. Yaichi and I were on the inside, running from board to board.”

“Playing that much would certainly have cracked your fingernails .....

“Fingernails don’t crack.”

Hearing that, Ai looks up at Big Sis and says. “Ohh? So then, it wasn’t as bad as you’re making it sound?”

“Knees, however, do crack .....

“*Gaaaaaaaasp!*”

Grade schoolers, terrified.

“I rarely ever get any exercise, but I ran around as fast as I could so much that day that my kneecaps got stress fractures ..... What I would’ve given to mount all the organizers’ heads on pikes .....

“That wasn’t Shogi, but a whole new kind of extreme sport .....

Instructional matches, especially simultaneous ones are a battle of endurance.

More often than not, the body gives out before the brain .....

“But, yeah, no one would put grade schoolers like you through hell like that. There won’t even be enough room for 1,000 people anyway.”

“Enough room where?”

“Your debut concert as *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street* will be right here in the Kansai Association’s second-floor classroom on the very stage where we keep the big board!”

“That’s tiny!!”

“Right over there?!”

I nod enthusiastically at Mio and Ai’s stunned looks. Enthusiasm is all I’ve got

left.

“Yes. Your first stage is waiting right there. The four of you being up there at the same time will be a bit of a squeeze, so keep the dancing to a minimum, okay?”

“We won’t be allowed to move during our debut concert as idols .....?”

“Can’t have you running into each other and falling off stage, right? There will be a railing, but .....”

After hearing my answer to Ayano’s question, I guess Big Sis must’ve felt sorry for her because very sympathetically she says, “Having railings at your first concert, that’s certainly something new .....”

Just above a groan.

Ai stares at the stage and adds with a tremble of fear.

“Um ..... Master? Don’t you think the commentary space is too small .....?”

“What are you talking about? 30 people can fit on that stage during match title commentary.”

Mio takes my side.

“Add in the classroom space, and 100 people would probably fit.”

“Ah, that’s a no go. The classroom will be open as usual.”

“Wha?”

Ai and Ayano are getting paler by the moment behind Mio.

“A live concert right next to customers playing Shogi .....”

“What a horrible distraction .....”

“An instruction match comes with the ticket. We need a place to play.”

Big Sis, who’s been snapping her fan open and shut during the conversation, speaks up.

“What about goods? If you’re going to have an event, why not make as much money as possible?”

That’s exactly why Big Sis, a current Sub League member, is involved in organizing association events.

We do need to have goods ready.

With a little luck, we could make several times more money off the gift shop than from selling tickets.

“Alright, we’ll have all the members sign autographs beforehand ..... I could add some of my signed fans as well. There are plenty of them in stock.”

“Aren’t your fans already on sale, Kuzuryu-sensei?”

“They don’t sell. One of the shop workers said that yours are *the worst-selling fans signed by a title holder ever* with his head in his hands.”

Ai’s hand shoots into the air as soon as Ayano finishes her explanation.

“I’ll buy a full box!”

“I truly have the kindest, most well-mannered apprentice ever!”

Big Sis closes her fan and starts spinning it between her fingers as she asks Ai, “And where are you planning on keeping them?”

“At Master’s apartment, why?” my apprentice answers with a grin.

Mio and Ayano flinch at the same time.

“They’re back home!”

“That would not qualify as a sale .....”

“It’s a recall.”

*Humph!* Big Sis snorts her nose. I just know she’s looking down on me because her fans sell out the moment they reach the shelves. She can’t make enough to meet demand.

“Cha! Cha want Masta’s fwan!” says Charlette, happily bouncing up and down. The kind heart of a six-year-old makes me happy .....

I go ahead and ask without a second thought, “You’re such a good girl, Charlette. Would you be mine?”

“Oui!”

“No, Master,” Ai says with a smile. She didn’t miss a beat.

Sensing the immediate need to appease my apprentice to dispel the black aura surrounding her, I take back what I just said.

“Nah, that was just a joke——.”

“That’s still a no, okay?”

“..... Yes.”

Sorry, part of me was serious. I’ll get rid of that part ..... I promise .....

“So, what are you going to have them do Yaichi? Sing? No singing?”

“How about we go to a karaoke place right now and practice some popular songs?”

“I have tutoring tonight,” says Mio.

“Cha, Cha’s gwonna sing *Momotawo*!”

“I-I can sing the songs from chorus at school, but ..... I’m not very good .....,” says each of the girls in turn, but.

“..... No, that won’t be necessary,” I answer them.

Piece stands are empty, and we don’t have time to practice singing or dancing. Things look bleak.

But, I’ve come back from the brink enough times to become the Ryuo!

I have just come up with a way to turn the tides and make this production a success.

“Master? Do you have an idea .....?”

“It’s true that Ms. Oga ordered me to produce a junior Shogi idol performance and to pursue a spot on this year’s Kohaku with their debut song ..... However!”

It’s time to unveil my come-from-behind grand slam!!

“A *performance* doesn’t necessarily mean a song. We will perform—a *match*!!”



Next day.

The association classroom is crammed full of more people than I was expecting.

*Crammed full* might not be the best way to put it ..... It’s a crowd of elderly people who came to play Shogi only to find that there was a special event going on and they decided to pull up chairs and wait.

Alright. These numbers are passable.

—Now all we have to do is make them happy they came .....

Watching *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street* from the doorway that leads to the emergency exit stairwell off to the side of the stage, my nerves start getting to me. Will this generation know what idols are?

Ai, a bit more dressed up than usual, is standing in the middle of the stage and greets the customers.

“H-Hello everyone!”

That starts the sequence.

“We are!”

“Junior Shogi idols!”

“Nawiwa Shwogi Stweet!”

The girls say their parts one after another.

Then a small scattering of applause comes from the audience.

..... Why don't old guys know when to clap .....?

It's hard to tell if they're enjoying themselves or not. This delay is terrifying. The girls might have to press forward no matter what the audience's reaction is .....

For better or worse, Ai seems so nervous that she's not looking at them at all.

“T-Today ..... Thank you so much for coming to our debut performance!”

Charging through the script up to that point, she shouts, “Now please enjoy *ten-second blind Shogi!*”

“Please follow along!!”

*Tadada♪*

Timed up with music I've heard somewhere before——.

“Welcome to the association classroom. I, Ginko Sora, will be providing commentary. Please take some time out of your Sunday to enjoy a contest of skills with us.”

Big Sis appears at the side of the big board greeting the audience in a way I've heard somewhere before as well.

First up, Ai's introduction.

“On offense is Miss Ai Hinatsuru. Apprentice to Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo, she currently ranks E-2 in the Practice League and is a member of class 4-3 at her elementary school. Particularly good at Shogi puzzles, her ability to checkmate and avoid being checkmated far exceeds her peers. Miss Hinatsuru is a fresh face in Kansai with great potential.”



Next, she introduces Mio.

“Her opponent today will be Miss Mio Mizukoshi on defense. Apprentice to Kazurou Kuresaka 7-*dan*, she ranks E-1 in the Practice League and is also a member of class 4-3 in elementary school. She is an all-rounder, capable of playing both Static Rook and Ranging Rook. In fact, she and Miss Hinatsuru are classmates at the same school.”

Big Sis’s introduction moves along swimmingly until she wraps it up.

“These two will be facing each other today. Please enjoy yourself and stay to find out who will win.”

A quick bow, and Big Sis moves to the right side of the big board.

“Now, allow me to introduce today’s analyst, Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo. *Sensei*, welcome to the stage.”

That’s my cue.

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Taking my place on the left side of the big board, I look Big Sis in the eyes as we start set up to do analysis.

“Today’s offender, Miss Hinatsuru, is your apprentice, correct?”

“Yes. Fate recently brought her to me, and I took her under my wing.”

“What is your impression of her?”

“Hmm. Well, in one word, *cute*.”

“..... Lolicon.”

“Huh? Did you just call me a lolicon?”

“I did not.”

I’m pretty sure she did .....

I know there’s nothing like that in the script. Big Sis is already stirring up

trouble.

While I'm worried about how bad things will get, trying to put a stop to her will bring this event to a grinding halt. My only choice is to work some warnings into the conversation.

"What are your impressions of the defender, Miss Mizukoshi?"

"Mio is the group's leader. Always smiling, she's the one who makes everyone feel at home whenever the girls have a practice session at my apartment. She's pretty cute, too."

"Adding to your collection, I see ....."

"Say what?!"

Big Sis presses forward, making her own additions to the script all without losing her radiant smile.

"What do you expect to see between these two during the match today?"

"Good question. They both are basically Static Rook party members, so I think they'll stick to the strategies they know best considering they'll be playing blind Shogi."

"*Yagura*, Bishop Exchange, Side Pawn Capture or perhaps Double Wing Attack ..... Which do you think we'll see?"

"Well, Double Wing Attack would be fun to watch. Then again, that's what I like to play. Hahaha!"

Blind Shogi puts a lot of pressure on the players but doesn't require much at all from the commentators. That's why we can take it easy and laugh like this. Grade schoolers are playing, so there are bound to be tons of mistakes (like losing track of pieces and whatnot). Who knows: this kind of thing might catch on.

Big Sis nods and continues.

“Let’s hear a quick word from the players before getting started. First, the offender Miss Hinatsuru. Please tell us your thoughts on Miss Mizukoshi and how you plan to play.”

“Uh, um!”

Ai is trembling like mad.

“Mio ..... Ah! M-Miss Mizu! M-Mizukoshi is the first friend I ever made at the association! And, um ..... I-I’ll ..... I’ll be using Static Rook!”

“Do you think you’ll win today?”

“I’m nervous with Master watching like this, but I’ll do my best ..... to make him proud of me!”

She stuttered her way through it, but Ai manages to finish the interview.

Then, Big Sis turns back to me and says in a much icier tone than before, “..... There you have it. What do you have to say, *Sensei*?”

“Yep. Isn’t she cute?”

“Drop dead kiddy-lover.”

“Huh?!”

“Moving on, let’s hear from the defender, Miss Mizukoshi. Would you tell us your impression of Miss Hinatsuru?”

“Of Ai? She’s real strong! Early game, middle, late, she’s good at all of them. But, I won’t lose .....”

“Any aspirations for today’s match?”

“Umm, pieces! ..... I’ll show everyone how I can make the pieces come alive!” says Mio, clearly proud of herself for making it to the end of the interview.

“..... Is her goal. What do you think, *Sensei*?”

“A bit unconventional, but that fits with how Kansai players play, don’t you

think?”

“She may have bit her tongue a little.”

“Yep. It would’ve been a cunning move if she did it on purpose, but Mio can be a little spacey. So, it was just adorable!”

“Loli-King .....

“Hey?!”

“Providing the countdowns today are Miss Ayano Sadatou and Miss Charlette Isior. If you please.”

“An earlier piece flip determined Miss Hinatsuru will make the first move. There is no waiting time. Each player must make a move within 10 seconds.”

“You wose if time up!”

Ayano is calm and focused but Charlette is having so much fun she can barely contain herself. It’s like she can’t wait to hit that chess clock. Relax, okay .....

Ai and Mio put on blindfolds and get in the zone.

Checking to make sure everyone is ready, Ayano starts the match.

“Please begin.”

“Ready when you are!”

Ai and Mio exchange a quick greeting.

Now! It’s time for the show!!

With all of us working together, we can make this into the best performance ever!!

“2 Six Pawn.”

“8 Four Pawn.”

“2 Five Pawn.”

“8 Five Pawn.”

“7 Eight Gold.”

“3 Two Gold.”

“2 Four Pawn.”

“Take with Pawn.”

“Take with Rook.”

“2 Three Pawn.”

“2 Six Rook.”

“7 Two Silver.”

“3 Eight Silver.”

“6 Four Pawn.”

“7 Six Pawn.”

“8 Six Pawn.”

..... Yeah.

It’s quiet in here. This is Shogi, after all.

And, since it’s blind Shogi, both players can’t play if they can’t hear what the other one says.

So, naturally, the audience is being careful not to make a sound .....

Taking it a step further, there aren’t any *snaps* or *clicks* because there aren’t any pieces ..... There’s nothing interesting from a visual standpoint either because it’s just two blindfolded girls looking down into their laps and sitting in chairs. I’m not sure if this surreal sight counts as a *performance* at all ..... My confidence as the producer is nothing more than ground dust at this point ..... But.

“Sensei, if you will.”

“Oh, right.”

Big Sis pulls me out of my train of thought, and I focus on the big board. I have to move the pieces to catch up to where they are in the match.

I hear Ai and Mio say, “Take with Pawn” and “Take with Rook” as I was doing that. Exchanging Pawns in front of the Rook means this match could get pretty intense.

Working with Big Sis, we get the big board caught up to where the girls are and I say, “Looks like we have a Double Wing Attack.”

“Your favorite strategy .....

“T-That’s right.”

Offensive Double Wing Attack is my strategy of choice and also how my first match with Ai went.

There are some players who purposely choose to use strategies the match commentator is good at during public matches like this one.

Commentators can’t add meaningful insight for strategies they don’t use themselves, so those players are doing the commentator a favor and helping them entertain the audience. Now, these two girls have grown up enough to do the same thing .....

“8 Seven Pawn.”

“8 Two Rook.”

“3 Six Pawn.”

“3 Four Pawn.”

“5 Eight King.”

“6 Three Silver.”

I was only reveling in my apprentice’s kindness for a few seconds, but the match charges on.

“Their pace is surprisingly fast.”

“For sure.”

Big Sis and I are so busy updating the big board that there’s no time for commentary or analysis.

“3 Five Pawn.”

“Take with Pawn.”

“3 Seven Sliver.”

The two say their moves back and forth using no time at all, almost like their sizing each other up in an intense stare down. Plenty of people in the audience look absolutely stunned that the girls can keep track of all this information at once——.

“Everything so far has been standard.”

“So they don’t have to think before making moves.”

The moment Big Sis adds that tidbit.

“.....”

Mio, who’d been racing through moves up to this point, pauses to think for the first time. Why .....?

“Hm? She must have something in mind.”

“Fibe, six, seven, eit——.”

My voice overlaps with Charlette’s countdown.

Then, Mio yells her next move with some extra oomph.

“8 Eight Bishop Promotes!”

“Whoa!!”

That move is so decisive that it caught me, the analyst, by surprise!

Ai, cautiously, “..... Take with Silver.”

“4 Two Silver!”

“Wohaa .....!”

“Quit making sounds and start providing analysis, Kuzuryu-*loli-king*,” Big Sis snaps at me before commenting on Mio’s sequence. She’s impressed, too, by the sound of it.

“She initiated a Bishop Exchange on defense all of a sudden .....”

“She did. The 4 Two Silver was particularly creative. She must have prepared that one at home getting ready for the match.”

I figured Ai would use the Double Wing, but .....

It turns out Mio was expecting the same thing and came up with this sequence ahead of time!

“3 Four Pawn.”

Mio tries to keep Ai on edge by saying her move as calmly as possible.

But, she’s not letting up at all, piling on the pressure like a shark smelling blood in the water.

“4 Four Pawn.”

“4 Six Silver.”

“5 Four Silver.”

“..... 7 Seven ..... Silver.”

Ai is struggling.

“Does this mean that Miss Mizukoshi goaded Miss Hinatsuru into using her own favorite strategy?”

“It certainly looks that way. That move puts the Defender in a favorable position.”

Mio’s voice is bubbling over with energy.

“4 Three Silver Forward.”



“6 Six Silver.”

“3 Four Silver!”

“7 Seven Knight.”

“5 Two Gold.”

“5 Five Silver Right.”

“4 Three Silver Right.”

“7 Five Silver.”

Ai is trying to break out of the sticky situation by gathering pieces into a strong push.

She’s probably thinking that having a clear mental Shogi board will give her an advantage, the more complicated the formations get.

But——.

“Miss Hinatsuru has taken the offensive.”

“Not quite ..... Mio is letting her attack.”

I don’t think this attack will hit home.

Mio must not think so either because she is playing like she’s setting up for something else .....

“4 Two King.”

“3 Eight Gold.”

“5 Four Pawn!”

“4 Four Silver.”

“Take with Silver.”

“ ..... ”

Ai’s hand, or should I say her voice, stops.

She's racking her brain to find the decisive move she so desperately needs.

"Five, six, seven——."

Ayano's countdown puts Ai under even more pressure to find the answer. On a side note, the two girls are splitting the countdown job with Charlette doing it for Mio and Ayano doing the same for Ai.

"7 One Bishop."

Big Sis makes a soft gasp and says, "She sent in her Bishop."

"It looks like she's going to exchange it for the Rook, but that's a risky move."

Just as I said.

"6 Two Rook."

Mio didn't seem anxious at all as she initiated the exchange herself.

Then, just like that——

"Take with Bishop Promote."

"Take with Gold."

"7 One Rook."

"4 Six Pawn!"

"Agh?!!" Ai screams.

Mio's counterpunch landed beautifully.

But there should be more where that came from.

"That was a very strong move, but an even stronger one is on the way. As to where she's going play that Bishop——."

Now it's my turn to show my skills as an analyst.

Glancing at Big Sis, I say.

"If I don't get it right, I'll ..... give up on you, Ginko!"

“Wh-What are you talking about? ..... Idiot .....”

“Master, you *dara*!!”

Commentator and player are angry at me.

Hmm. This may be just an event, but maybe I pushed the envelope a little too far .....

Well, my joke may have fallen flat, but my prediction comes true.

“1 Four Bishop!” Mio declares with gusto.

Her newly deployed Bishop leaves Ai numb.

“Ah?! Agh .....”

“That move there puts the defender at a distinct advantage. Wow, that attack was razor-sharp.”

My apprentice is being pushed up against the ropes, but Mio deserves some praise for that one.

“Five, six, seven, eight, nine.”

“4 Eight Pawn!” Ai shouts, just barely getting it out in time.

“4 Six Pawn.”

Unfortunately, Mio’s calm, instantaneous response has her biting her lip trying to endure the pressure.

“Ta ..... Take with ..... Rook.”

“Deploy 4 Five Silver.”

The formation is in Mio’s favor.

As long as she keeps driving Ai back into a corner, victory is hers for the taking.

An important part of an analyst’s job is to keep the audience entertained even when the match isn’t interesting anymore.

Big Sis asks me, “I believe you mentioned earlier that the strategy was *prepared at home*, did you not?”

“I did.”

“And Miss Hinatsuru lives with you, correct Kuzuryu-sensei?”

“Yes. She does.”

I nod without a second thought. Meanwhile, Ai is desperately trying to save her Rook.

“1 Six Rook .....

“4 Six Pawn.”

“..... 1 Four Rook.”

“4 Seven Pawn Promote.”

“Take with Pawn.”

Maybe it’s because she’s already given up, but Ai calls out her moves one after another. Mio, on the other hand, is starting to use more time to think. She must be searching for checkmate.

“What is your normal practice routine?”

“At home?”

I try to figure out exactly what Big Sis is asking.

Just like Mio, I take a moment or two to think. Making decisions is hard when you’ve got several ways to win at once.

“Hmm .....

“Fibe, six, seven, eit.”

“Deploy 3 One Gold!”

“..... 3 Four Rook!”

“Huh?! ..... Take with Silver?”

“We train mainly by playing matches, but Ai doesn’t know the standards very well yet. So the Shogi ends up strange, or you could say twisted, I guess.”

That same Ai has started rocking back and forth while whispering, “..... Here, here, here, hereherehereherehere .....” under her breath.

It’s a habit she’s picked up when she’s really focused.

“1 One Dragon.”

“2 Eight Rook!”

“6 Nine King.”

“2 Nine Rook Promotes!”

“5 Nine Lance.”

“5 Five Knight!”

“3 Three Pawn!”

“Huuuh?!! Uh, uhh ..... Take with Silver?”

“5 Six Bishop.”

“4 Five Bishop!”

“Take with Bishop.”

“4 Seven Knight does not promote.”

“7 Nine King.”

Ai’s slippery sequence prevents Mio from finding the finishing blow.

Big Sis gives me a satisfied nod.

“Oh, I see. The twisted Shogi you’re so good at, right *Sensei*?”

“Well, Golds and the King often rise up to the fourth row in our matches, but yes.”

“And, you use such twisted techniques with your King and Golds raised

against a little girl.”

“Hey, hey, hold up, Big Sis! You’ll give someone the wrong idea, saying things like that!”

“The wrong idea? Heh! Hardly a claim that someone living with a girl in elementary school can make.”

I don’t like where this is headed!!

“Umm .....

“Fibe, six, seb——.”

“4 Five Silver.”

“8 Eight King.”

“.....!”

“Fibe, six, seven, eit, ni——.”

“5 Nine Knight Promotes!”

Charlette is counting down a lot now more than she was before. In other words, Mio is using every last second she has to think things through.

Is she against the ropes .....? Just like me .....

“I-I’m talking about Shogi, not grade school girls!”

“What’s this, Yaichi? Running away?”

“Huh? Is Ai making a comeback?”

Rather than respond to Big Sis, I comment on something strange happening on the board.

What’s more, Ai was squirming in pain only a few minutes ago but now she’s sitting up straight and tall.

“6 Four Silver.”

“Uh, um? ..... Uh, 2 Two Silver!”

“4 Four Silver.”

“Uhhh .....? Wh-Why would? Huh .....?”

Sensing something’s up, Mio shudders in disbelief. What what? This *is* strange.

She’s got the look of someone more focused on *Where did I go wrong?* than *What move should I play next?* Not a good sign for someone playing ten-second Shogi.

“Ummm, ummm .....

“Fibe, six, seven, eit, nin——.”

Right as Charlette was saying *nine*, the very last instant she could make her move.

“5 Two Pawn!”

Mio yells.

“Huh?”

Surprised, Ai jumps to her feet.

“She didn’t!”

“She did, she really did.”

Big Sis and I are stunned. We even forgot we were on stage.

Can you blame us? This is .....

“Huh?! Uhhhh?!!”

Mio doesn’t understand what just happened, so Ai explains it to her as gently as she can.

“..... Mio, that’s Two Pawn .....

“Agh! Sorry! I lost!”

She throws in the towel the second she realizes what she’s done.

Yes.

The last move she called out put two Pawns in the same column: Two Pawn—she broke the rule and forfeited the match.

Ayano, staying calm, says in a very clear voice, “..... This match has ended. The offender has claimed victory in 90 moves.”

This is the part when the camera would be getting a close-up of my apprentice and the words spelling out *Winner: Ai Hinatsuru* if the match were being broadcast on one of the Sunday Shogi TV shows.

As for Mio the defeated—.

“Awhh ..... Why’d I have to go and do that .....?”

“.....”

“Horrible ..... Just horrible .....”

Her face is so twisted up in pain that tears could start flowing at any second. The word *horrible* keeps coming out of her mouth on an endless loop.

Sure, Two Pawn happens a lot in blind Shogi ..... But it’s just so sad it had to happen to her when she had such a big lead.

“.....”

Ai understands the pain that Mio is going through right now so much that she can’t say anything at all.

This is getting awkward .....

“..... And there you have it. A rather shocking conclusion to today’s match, but .....”

Big Sis shows some rare compassion for the grade schooler.



“Kuzuryu-sensei, do you have any comments reflecting on the match as a whole?”

“Certainly. Though Mio lost due to playing Two Pawn at the end ..... Well, both the girls in anguish were really cute, so it’s all good, don’t you think?”

“You’re such a lolicon .....

“Say what?!”



“..... And that’s basically what happened.”

A few weeks after *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street* made their debut, I was in a café in Kobe, drinking coffee and telling the person across from me about that legendary stage.

Once I get to the end of the story, the girl sitting on the other side of the table sticks her fork into her favorite pastry, a honey altena, and says, “Humph. The Shogi Association thinks up some truly pointless things.”

She sounds like she couldn’t care less.

Ai Yashajin. Nine years old.

I started giving her Shogi lessons a little while ago on the chairman’s orders.

While she and my apprentice both have the name, *Ai*, her black clothes and hair along with her lone-wolf personality make them total opposites.

She has no respect for me, the Ryuo, whatsoever. She even takes shots at the association whenever she gets a chance.

I force a smile and try to converse with my scathing student.

“No need to say that. The sales turned out pretty good and people seemed to like it. A few customers loved it, saying it was like watching their

granddaughters play.”

“Only elderly people would be interested at all .....

“I’ll admit there needs to be some fine tuning.” I lean over the table and say, “Which is why I’ve been looking for a fifth member——.”

“I won’t.”

“The problem is, you and my apprentice have the same name .....

“I just said I’m not doing it. Weren’t you listening? Maybe you should hit your head on the pointy end of a Shogi piece and die to save me the trouble?”

“Yes! A sadistic grade school girl! That’ll be a hit for sure.”

Blending that spice with the four cute but vanilla members of the group should give the performances a brand-new edge .....

“I said no, didn’t I?! I have zero interest in becoming an idol and, even if I did, I would never consider joining your apprentice and her friends!!”

“But you’re required to join *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street* if you want to be a member of the Practice League.”

“What? Why?!”

“..... The higher-ups made that decision.”

\*This story was originally produced for *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!* 2 Drama CD and formatted for this book.

# (MATCH JOURNAL)

I became a Women's Shogi player when I was in elementary school and have been playing a total of eight years.

I took some time to reflect on the experience I've built up during those eight years.

I have been lucky enough to never surrender the title after claiming one and reaching the point where Shogi fans recognize my face as well as my name.

Though rather embarrassing, they've bestowed me with a nickname (and this is my first time admitting it's grown on me).

However, as strong younger players appear on the scene, I have my hands full protecting my titles. As a result, I've struggled to produce in other Shogi matches.

Even if I manage to force a meaningful match, I can't win from that point on anymore.

I hold Women's Titles, but professional players have an overwhelming advantage over me in terms of matches played.

Inevitably, my free time increases with every match that I lose.

A Shogi player's future is determined by how they use that free time, but ..... I felt it was my duty as a title holder, that I had an obligation to pass on to others the kindness of Women's League players who helped me and started focusing on promotion.

The time I could set aside for research went down, but I told myself that was unavoidable and went along with it.

I did commentary for TV broadcasts, interviews for all types of magazines

rather than just Shogi ones, and even made appearances on variety shows.

My efforts resulted in Women's Shogi reaching new audiences and attracting more fans to participate in Shogi events.

I was satisfied ..... And I thought the fans were just as happy.

However, a few comments fans made when I was outside of Osaka making a guest appearance at a regional event changed my mind.

"Are you slacking off these days?"

"You must be raking in the dough, going to all these events."

"Ahhh, Women's Shogi players have it so easy. You're real lucky."

It was all I could do to keep a dry smile on my face.

My sacrificing research time to promote Shogi ..... had resulted in tarnishing the reputation of Women's League players.

Ever since that day, my views on *promotion* have changed.

So long as I'm playing Shogi, there's no point to sacrificing my own time in order to promote the sport if I don't win. Fans are much happier to see one strong Women's League player at a single event than seeing a weak player attending hundreds.

That will be my contribution to Women's Shogi as a title holder: getting strong.

Once my mind was set, I stopped participating in most events and focused on my research.

I became a competitive demon once again.



YAMASHIRO OUKA TITLE MATCH 3





“..... That event was rough .....”

Just thinking back on that Shogi event (?)—so unconventional it bordered on reckless—still sends chills down my spine.

Ai looks up at me and asks, “Will *Naniwa Suji Shogi Street* ever do anything else?”

“Well ..... I wonder.”

It’s not like they weren’t well received, and you’d think the higher-ups in the Kansai Shogi Association would take advantage of Ai joining the Women’s League to sell some more merchandise.

But, yeah .....

“..... What about the other girls?”

“They said being on stage was fun but never want to do blind Shogi again!”

I don’t blame them.

Crowds love watching blind Shogi, so we do it at events quite a bit, but even pros have trouble handling that kind of pressure.

I feel that it’s my duty as the producer to make sure that if they ever go on stage again ... they’ll have a song and dance perfectly prepared and ready to go.

“It’s hard to believe that all that happened less than a year ago and I can’t believe I have two apprentices in the Women’s League. I know you’re both my apprentices, but it’s still hard for me to believe.”

“I can’t believe it either .....,” says Ai shyly.

Maybe I was a bit hard on her when we were watching the title match this afternoon.

This girl is just so talented that I want to teach her everything at once, but .....

She's just 10 years old.

There's still plenty of time. I can teach her things little by little.

"Well, there's plenty I don't know about the work Women's League players do or how they prepare. This is a good chance for you to see how top Women's League players do what they do with your own eyes. Learn what you can."

"Y ..... Yes!"

She nods happily and wraps her arms around my back in a big hug.

I want her to be able to fend for herself as quickly as possible, but ..... That desire goes up in smoke whenever she gets clingy like this. She's too damn adorable.



Then, that night.

Once we'd finished walking around Shinkyogoku, Ai and I arrived at the hotel the chairman booked for us and went to bed right away.

It's right in the middle of the city, so it's not like there's a hot spring to check out, and there isn't any night-before party for people involved in the title match so that the players, exhausted after today, can get some rest. The party they had last night before Match Two counts as the one for Match Three as well.

I've got a room to myself and Ai will be staying in Ms. Oga's room.

I said it'd be fine to share a single room with Ai since this was real short notice, but ...

*"I can't demand that a title holder, especially the Ryuo, put up with such cramped accommodations. The fate of the Shogi world rests on your shoulders and it's about time you realize that. You absolutely must not stay at a hotel with your preteen apprentice. Sharing a single room would be outrageous. Is that*



*understood?”*

I have to obey the chairman if he is going to be that insistent.

It's not every day someone as laid-back as him speaks with that much force. This must be really important. I mean, I live with my apprentice, but even so ...

I guess formalities mean a lot when you're the Eternal Meijin. It's time for me to watch and learn .....

*“Yaaaaawn ..... After all that walking, I should be out like a light .....”*

Most players tend to be night owls, but we spend so much time indoors that even the smallest bit of exercise zaps our energy.

I became the Elementary Meijin in third grade, turned pro in junior high and became the Ryuo while my former classmates were in high school. So, basically, I represent both the top Shogi players my age and the *indoorsy* Shogi players as a whole. I am the ultimate indoor person. What I'm trying to say is that my legs are killing me.

It's not even 9 o'clock at night but I'm already sleepy.

I plug my phone in next to my bed to charge it.

Just as I was about to set the alarm, a message from Ai pops up.

*“Sleep well, Master.”*

It came attached with a picture of her and Ms. Oga in bathrobes. Seems like they're getting along great so there's nothing to worry about.

*“Now then, it's time call it a night .....”*

I climb in between the covers knowing that I'll be asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow——.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Someone's knocking on a door.

Knocking on ..... my door?

“Who would that be at this hour?”

Mentally preparing myself for a drunk Ryou Tsukiyomizaka to be on the other side, I turn the knob and——.

Come face to face with someone I wasn't expecting.

“..... Machi?”

“Care to join me for a stroll?”

“Huh?”

..... Come again? A stroll?



“Hey, Machi .....”

After sneaking out as quietly as possible to avoid being spotted by any association staff, I keep my distance walking behind one of the stars of tomorrow's match and whisper as quietly as possible.

“Where are we going so late at night? A convenience store?”

“So-me-pla-ce ni-ce≡”

She grins at me, her lips curling up like one of those Fushimi Inari foxes as she responds.

Machi won't tell me where we're headed no matter how many times I ask. I've got a bad feeling about this .....

Now a good distance from the hotel, we start walking side-by-side.

Passing through where I was with Ai in Shinkyogoku earlier this evening, Machi leads me toward Shijyou Ohashi Bridge.

There are a lot of people out and about at this hour because of all the bars in the area.

I have a really bad feeling about this.

“..... We’re not going out for drinks, are we?”

“What’s this, Ryuo-san? Do I appear to be such a bad girl?” says Machi with an evil grin on her lips.

Actually, she looks pure evil. Seriously, where are we going?

But, my fears were quickly put to rest.

“Observe.”

Leaning over the bridge’s guardrail, Machi points across the river to where a bunch of people are sitting in a line and speaks like she’s performing in a play.

“Those souls be the famous *Couple Intervals Sitting at the Kamo River Bank!*”

“..... Oh!”

I knew this place was a well-known dating spot ..... But is this the kind of thing a player would sneak out of their hotel the night before a match to see?

“But yeah, they really do line up like that. Is there a rule to it?”

“Rules do not exist when it comes to romance.”

Machi flips her hair back with a satisfied “Hmph .....,” as if she’s said something profound. It’s been a while since she struck a nerve, but that did it.

I’m heading back already.

“..... And? You woke me up just as I was getting to bed and made me sneak out of my own hotel room just to show me this?”

“Ryuo-san. But of course you had a chance to explore Kyoto with your apprentice in the afternoon, yes? I thought this would be a good opportunity for you to experience the *adult side* of the city. To see the real Kyoto.”

“I got my fill this afternoon. The Kamo River is pretty famous, sure, but compared to Arashiyama and Sagano’s Bamboo Grove ..... Yeah?”

“Mhh .....

Machi puckers her lips——.

“The location was at fault for why I couldn’t play to my potential in today’s match.”

Well, that came from out of nowhere.

“Tenryuji Temple is as away as away can be.”

“Away?”

“Very much so.”

Nothing she says is making any sense. All I can do is tilt my head.

She’s from Kyoto, so how could she be *away* .....?

Machi must’ve noticed the doubt in my eyes because she jumps right into a full rant.

“Were you aware that Tenryuji Temple was built by Shogun Takauji Ashikaga for the sole purpose of appeasing the spirit of Emperor Godaigo? A barbarian stormed in from Kanto and built it all to seal away the emperor. The disadvantages to playing a match in such a place should be as glaring as an inferno.”

“I ..... guess so?”

I get the feeling some details are getting twisted .....

“Sagano has never been a part of Kyoto proper. It simply grows vegetables for the city and serves as a place for Kyoto’s citizens to make day trips to stretch their legs. Playing Shogi in such backwater countryside would surely produce moves as inspiring as potatoes!”

“.....”

Well, I sure hope that never gets back to the people of Sagano .....

It might be because she lost, but Machi rarely gets this riled up.

I thought she'd move past the loss and successfully flipped the switch at the press conference, but it seems that was all an act to hide how upset she was from the rest of us.

The whole reason she dragged me out here for a *stroll* is because she'd keep reliving today's Shogi if she were alone in her room.

She must think she can force the switch to flip by talking with someone else.

That's an important technique for competitors.

"All right. Fine." My shoulders slump as I say, "I'll stick with you until you're satisfied, just please tell me where we're going."

"To survey tomorrow's arena."

"Oh yeah ..... Match Three happens on Kamo River's riverbank, right?"

"Yes. The arena is being constructed on the bank as we speak."

Machi offers an explanation that sounds more like hometown pride.

"The riverbanks of the Kamo are known for the *Noryo-doko* scenery in summer, but staging kabuki performances here has been trendy as of late. As such, a kabuki stage has been rented for the next Ouka Title Match. The spotlight shall be much larger than the day before."

"A kabuki stage ..... for Shogi?"

"Just as kabuki originated from the Kamo River banks, Kyoto's own Ohashi family brought Shogi into existence. Pieces still in use today were developed by Kyoto's noble houses as well."

I remember hearing about that from Master and other veteran pros.

Shogi came from Kamigata, the Kansai area.

That's why Kansai players consider themselves the *true* Shogi players.

Now that I think about it, Shumai-sensei mentioned that there were two sects of Banshi board makers: the *Gosho-ha* were from the Kamigata area while the *Oshiro Go* descended from people in the Tokyo area when it was called Edo.

"Was your family involved in making Shogi pieces back then, Machi?"

"As a side business when food was scarce is what I heard. Making Shogi pieces, making *karuta* playing cards."

"So, your ancestors made pieces to help support themselves. Huh, that's interesting. How long ago was that?"

"The Edo Period, if memory serves me."

So, about 300 years ago then. Kyoto's noble families run deep .....

"They also dabbled in pillow books."

"Pillow books?"

"What we would refer to today as adult comics."

Huh? R-rated stuff?!

"Differing from Edo's *ukiyou-e* wood prints, Kamigata's *nikuhitu-ga*—each was painted directly onto the sheets of paper. It was just that refinement, which made producing them the perfect side business for those of higher standing."

"Oh, I see. That's why you have such a filled-out bod ..... [*cough, cough!!*] That's why you're so talented when it comes to writing and photography. But I think it would've been fine for them to draw normal things rather than lewd stuff."

"Material of a certain persuasion sells well no matter what era."

A certain persuasion .....?

I let that slip because, while I'm not exactly sure what she means, it's better

not to ask. I get our conversation back on track.

“B-But, can we see the stage from here?”

“It’s further upriver, in the Sanjyo Ohashi vicinity.”

“So, one main street away?”

“It’s not far from the Ponto-cho Kaburenjo theater. It’s hard to see from here because the sun has already set.”

“Well? Should we walk?”

Sanjyo is only a station away on the train. It wouldn’t take that long.

“Yes. We shall.”

With that, Machi takes hold of my arm and pulls it right into her body.

Pressing up against ..... whoa, whoa, whoooooa?!

“Hey! Huuuh?! W-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“The route requires us pass through the Kamo River riverbank. Manners insist that we behave as a couple would. It’s proper etiquette here in Kyoto.”

It is?! Is all of Kyoto like this?!

The problem is that the city is flooded with Shogi Association staff members. I bet a few of them are just up the street drinking right now.

If anyone saw us like this .....!

Or worse, told Ai or Big Sis about it .....!!

“We’re ..... just going to survey the area, right?! Like a preview?!”

“A preview, yes, a preview~,” says Machi like she’s having the time of her life as she guides me down toward the riverbed with my left arm pinned between her immense boobs.



“Here will suffice.”

Down on the riverbank, Machi happens to see a spot open up when another couple leaves just as we were getting close and comes to a stop.

“Now, have a seat≡”

“Whaaat?”

Tugging at my arm, she plops down like it’s the next logical step.

Huh .....?

“Wait, what? Sit down? ..... Why?”

“Hmm ..... Because I’m tired?”

“We haven’t even been outside for 30 minutes yet!”

And, I’m pretty sure you just pulled that excuse out of thin air!

“We’re going to look around tomorrow’s stage, right?! That’s why we left the hotel in the first place!!”

“Think of that as a little something to look forward to tomorrow.”

“Then what the hell are we doing out here?!”

Suddenly yelling at the top of my lungs, all the other couples around us glare at me like I’m getting in their way.

“What’s going on?”

“A lover’s spat?”

“Shouting at his girl like that, what a prick .....”

Ngh .....!

Hey, I’m the one getting strung along here ..... I’m the victim ... me .....!

“Ryuo-san. Speaking so loudly will only disturb the other people gathered



here. Now, sit down and enjoy a nice conversation with me≡”

“.....”

I grudgingly take a seat.

Let me be clear, I’m not doing this because I want to, okay?

There aren’t any thoughts going through my head like *Wow, I’m sitting with the couples along the Kamo River* or *Oh, I’m with one of the cutest girls here! I’m a big shot now, aren’t I* or *Machi, aren’t those a bit too big .....*? No, not a single one.

She takes a sterling silver bottle and a cup out of her tote bag, pours some tea into the cup and holds it out to me. This has turned into a picnic.

“Go ahead, partake of some tea.”

“..... Thanks.”

I was just starting to get thirsty, so I take the gulp without complaining.

Just as that liquid touches my lips——.

“.....! This is good .....

I’m just so stunned that those are the only words that come out.

It’s so cool and crisp that all the strung-out nerves in my body feel quenched all at once.

I-Is this really tea?! Is tea supposed to be this good?!

If this is what real tea is supposed to be, then the colored water served up by Sub League members during matches at the Kansai Shogi Association belongs in the sewer.

Everyone always says the tea is much better in Kansai than in Kanto, but ..... Compared to the tea in my hands right now, it’s like comparing a Rook to a Pawn.

In fact, calling it *tea* seems a bit too casual .....

It's a royal taste worthy of being called *His Excellency, Lord Tea* .....!

"But of course. I prepared it myself at the hotel. Made from the same renowned water drawn at the heavenly Karasuma Shrine for the great Michizane Sugawara's first bath and the finest Uji tea leaves."

"Well, no wonder ....."

I take another sip of Machi's ceremoniously brewed tea.

There is a hint of a sweet, yet full flavor within the bitter overtones while leaving behind a refreshing aftertaste.

Not to mention it's cold and goes down smooth.

"It's pretty good cold, too."

"Actually, cooling it quickly preserves both the aroma and flavor. Heat only speeds up the oxidation process."

Sharing her expertise, Machi starts taking even more things out of her bag.

"These are fried *onigiri* rice balls that I prepared at my hotel's kitchen."

"Y-You sure went all out ....."

"Indeed. I am a woman who lives to serve," she says with a smile, extending the rice ball encased in aluminum foil out to me and nods before saying, "I have neither Ai's desire for exclusivity nor trying personality quirks like Ginko. I'm simply satisfied being close by. A rather convenient woman, if you will."

"??? What are you talking about?"

"Hehehe. I wonder."

Machi laughs like she's insinuating something and then rests her head on my shoulder.

Her smooth, silky hair brushes against my cheek and there's a really good

smell in the air ..... My heart's jumping around my chest like a bucking bronco.

“H-Hey ..... That's too close .....

“Eeeeeveryone's doing the same. Not a soul cares what transpires beside them. Dark as it is, some venture into more risqué territory——.”

M ..... more risqué?! Say what?!

My head snaps toward her in a knee-jerk reaction——.



“Hehe≡ Yes .....?”

“.....No. N-Nothing .....”

Ulterior motives are written all over that grin.

There are only two years between us, but Machi’s so much more grown up than I am.

—She’s toying with me, plain and simple .....

“..... May I ... have some more tea?”

“And help yourself to more *onigiri*, too≡”

I bet we look like some college girl pestering her high school-aged boyfriend to anyone else around us: public display of affection.

One of those PDA couples for sure.

But, as a guy who’s always been looking after younger girls, having someone take care of me has kind of a new thrill to it .....

There’s a lot of assertive younger girls in my life at the moment, like Ai Hinatsuru, Ai Yashajin, the Grade Schooler Practice Group, and Big Sis, and Big Sis, and Big Sis.

I’ve always felt that way about Keika, but I might be into older women after all ..... I think to myself looking out at all the city lights reflecting in the Kamo River.

A few moments pass without either of us saying a word—.

When suddenly, I hear Machi say, “..... I have always, always been beneath O-Ryou.”

“Be ..... neath?”

“Do you recall the Elementary Meijin Title Match?”

“Of course I do. It was the first time the four of us met.”

I was in the third grade and Machi was in fifth. It's already been eight years since then.

The semifinal matchups were——

Ayumu Kannabe (5th) vs. Yaichi Kuzuryu (3rd)

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka (5th) vs. Machi Kugui (5th)

"Thinking back, those were great matchups, and everyone says two girls making it to the semifinals almost never happens."

"Not to mention the eventual winner was a boy in his third year of elementary school and the youngest in history to take the title."

"Yeah, but Big Sis took it as a second grader the next year, so ....."

A girl and the youngest ever.

She smashed my record like it was nothing, so of course no one remembers what I did. Yep, she's been a roadblock and one serious pain in the neck pretty much all my life .....

"I was defeated by O-Ryou in the semifinal and broke down in tears at the back of the studio ..... Where one *Yaichi* came to console me."

"But, Machi-*cha* ..... You were bawling your eyes out ....."

Keika always told me, *Are you listening, Yaichi? When a girl cries, it's the boy's job to cheer her up.*

So, basically, I was just doing what she said.

Then again, most of the time it was to console Big Sis when she was throwing a tantrum after I beat her in a match, but ..... It also turned out to be how I met Machi.

"After that, I went right into the Sub League and you joined Kansai's Practice League, right Machi? We used to bump into each other at the association all the time. Ryou would drop in when she was on field trips, too. With Ayumu joining

Kanto's Sub League, the four of us became friends and rivals at the same time. It was like we had a strange connection——."

"Not the four. Only three."

"Huh .....?"

"I was on the outside looking in as I never took part in the Sub League."

There's quite a bit of pain in her voice. I sure wasn't expecting that.

——That's how she felt about it .....?

It's true that, of the four of us, Machi is the only one who never played in the Sub League.

Then again, Ayumu and I are the only ones who made it through to the pros .....

"O-Ryou entered the Sub League. Though she was forced to bow out in the end ..... She made a valiant attempt."

Once Ryou qualified to become a Women's League player, she put it on hold when she was a second-year junior high school student and entered the Sub League ranked at 5-*kyu*. That kind of thing was allowed at the time.

But, she must've really struggled in the Sub League.

For someone as fiery as she is to be forced out after one year .....

"However, I never attempted to take that step."

Looking at the opposite bank of the Kamo River ..... No, someplace much further away, Machi continues.

"While partially due to my family and Master's objections, they are but an excuse. In the end, I lacked confidence in my own ability."

"..... That doesn't mean joining the Sub League would've been the right choice. Everyone has their own way of getting stronger——."

“That’s a lie.”

“.....”

“One must battle strong opponents under the harshest conditions. No other way of becoming strong exists. Ginko is living proof. Should she fail in her attempt to become a professional and thus participate in all Women’s League matches, she would lay claim to all six Women’s League titles ... at which time I shall be discarded.”

“B-But, Machi ..... You have so many talents! You’re a skilled journalist and made it into college. I didn’t even go to high school.”

“Attending college, writing articles. All were ventures I undertook because I didn’t believe in my talent on the Shogi board. My parents constantly badger me to *quit Shogi and seek employment with a newspaper if I insist on involvement with Shogi*. I am simply using that as an excuse to create escape routes for myself .....!”

Her voice starts out small but grows more and more powerful with each word.

Almost like ..... she hates who she is right now.

“Today’s loss was inevitable. O-Ryou refused the other paths and wholly committed herself to Shogi. Meanwhile, I’m restrained by so many lifelines that my Shogi suffers for it.”

“That’s not true at all ..... Sure, you lost today, but you’ve done a great job protecting the title, yeah? You’ve left some fantastic match records behind, too, don’t you think?”

*Hmff!* She almost snorts.

“Women’s League match records have no value. Tell me, has a single Women’s League match been considered memorable? If a Shogi player’s purpose is to leave match records behind while furthering our understanding of



Shogi theory ..... My presence has no meaning within the Shogi world. Am I wrong?"

"....."

"Adorned in pretty clothes and put up on a fancy stage to be viewed by the masses, my concentration suffers and results in a plethora of mistakes on the board. Surely you've heard the claim: *Women's Shogi is fun to watch because of the twists and turns*? That's not a proper match! It's a show, nothing more! Look no further than the Yamashiro Ouka title and all its theatrics for definitive proof!!"

It would be easy to just say it's not like that.

But Machi is so much smarter than me. She'd see right through whatever I say and end up feeling even worse.

So I don't say anything.

Because I know players don't feel validated just because someone recognizes their ability.

Winning is the only thing that will do that.

Shogi will tell us whether our own ideas and effort were worth it or not by wins and losses. Another person's words are worthless.

Winning matches is the only way to prove our existence has meaning.

But—.

"..... Defensive Shogi chisels away your longevity. My body and heart are already beaten to a pulp ..... As if pinned behind a crumbling *anaguma* ....."

"Well ....."

It's not just the agony of today's defeat getting to her.

She's been playing Shogi since she was a little kid and fighting against monsters the whole time. Machi's got to be running out of steam.

It's true that playing defensively takes a lot out of you, like my Master for example.

People often refer to him as *tempered iron*, but he's ground away his molars during all that time under pressure and now it's to the point where dentures aren't an option for him. He even looks so old compared to his older brother apprentice Chairman Tsukimitsu who plays offensively: it's hard to believe they're the same age.

It's true that pro Shogi player life expectancy is shorter than the average person.

As for me, people tend to know me for my defensive skills. They see how thin my King's defenses are and appreciate all the intricacies I put into claiming victory.

But from my point of view, it's the rush that comes stopping my opponent by a hair that I enjoy. I'm not purposely trying to *defend*.

Offensive and defensive styles make no difference to me. Everything about Shogi is a blast.

Having the mindset to *not anguish over defense* is more of a personality trait rather than a technique.

Even if you can keep up appearances, fundamentally changing your personality is much harder. And, I think most of that is set in place at birth anyway.

If she's hurting this much right now ..... It'll never get easier for her.

So long as she keeps playing Shogi, that pain will last forever.

"But, I must admit ..... No matter how much I stew over it, no matter the agony ..... I cannot distance myself from Shogi."

"Because ..... you love it?"

"..... In a sense."

Machi turns to look at me and says, “My own Shogi ..... is purely headstrong. I despise how it lacks any trace of talent whatsoever. Those with talent, however ... that I love. I love their Shogi.”

“It’s the same for me. I’m sure anyone, no matter who they are, wants whatever it is they don’t have.”

I don’t know how I should put what I’m about to say, but——.

I decide to go with this.

“To be honest, I wish I was just as headstrong as you, Machi.”

“..... *Headstrong* is hardly a compliment for a lady.”

“Sorry.” I give a little bow before looking her directly in the eyes and say, “But, I love it, Machi. I love your Shogi.”

“.....!”

That constant *cool older sister* vibe of hers crumbles away.

Her face returns to the one I remember in elementary school, that crying girl——Machi-*chan*’s face, for just a moment.

Then her cheeks flush red as she turns away and whispers, “..... And whose fault do you think it is I cannot distance myself .....?”

“Huh?”

I can’t make out any of her mumbling. The river’s flowing waves are too loud.

Staring at the ground, Machi suddenly looks up with a burst of energy.

“That’s enough of my story! Now it’s your turn, Ryuo-san!”

“Come again?!”

“You entertained O-Ryou with a story of yours, yes? Therefore, not doing the same for me would be unfair. Perhaps I shall inform the match committee?”

“Huh? Buuuut—— .....”

I hate to fight over something as pointless as that.

Machi presses those massive boobs right up against me and says, “Come on, now. Entertain me.”

“I-I suppose I can. Alright——.”

Machi is under so much pressure to do her duty as a title holder right now that she’s getting crushed.

In that case ..... I want to tell her an inspirational story.

Something that will at least take her mind off the situation while she’s listening.

A story that will let her forget about Shogi for a moment and make her smile.

I want her to laugh and make fun of me like she always does.

Getting control of my beating heart, I think back through my own memories and recall the first time I carried out my own duty.

My duty as a title holder, as the Ryuo and my first job that *didn’t involve Shogi*——.





# A Top-Tier Player's Work!





“My apologies for taking time out of your busy schedule.”

It popped up out of nowhere.

Early summer. May is coming to a close and the whole Shogi world is on edge with the placement match schedule about to be set.

As for me, with the roller coaster of events that surrounded my taking a new apprentice, Ai Yashajin, leveling off, I thought I’d finally have time to focus on my own matches, but .....

Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu called me into the Kansai Association’s office and said in his usual super-calm voice, “You see, Ryuo——job requests *not involving Shogi* have been submitted for you.”

“!!”

——Could it be .....?!

Finally! I jump out of my chair in excitement, which must have surprised the chairman’s secretary, Sasari Oga Former Women’s 1-*dan*, standing next to the chairman because she had to readjust her glasses.

“Ryou? Why have you stood up?”

“Ah, nothing ..... Just ..... I-I was just excited to hear somebody asked for me .....”

“Really? I’m glad to hear that.”

A faint smile appears on the blind chairman’s face like he was expecting me to say that.

Ms. Oga glances my way and says, “May we continue?”

“Oh, sorry. Please .....”

I slowly slide back into my chair as Ms. Oga clears her throat and starts talking

about the job requests that *didn't involve Shogi*, which came to the association.

But before that, allow me to explain.

There are two ways for Shogi players to take on jobs.

The first is when someone contacts the player directly.

We may be registered with the Shogi Association, but pro Shogi players are freelancers. In other words, each one of us does our own thing. Of course, we are free to refuse any requests that come our way.

The second way is when someone goes through the association.

The Shogi Association receives requests for Shogi-related jobs from all over Japan. Some of the most common are judges for Shogi tournaments, advisors for Shogi clubs at schools and companies, interviews for magazines, TV spots, you name it.

The association then distributes these jobs as fairly as possible among all pro players, but .....

The problem is that I'm a *title holder*.

And it's not just any title, but the top. Dragon King Ryuo.

— Title holders are duty bound to protect the status that comes with their title .....

Unlike titleless players, title holders can't just drop by an event somewhere to do a few instructional matches and aren't allowed to work as observers for other title matches.

Basically, our work scope is rather limited.

—That's why I've barely received any work from the association other than league matches up until now .....

Then again, that meant I had enough time to take two apprentices.

But, not getting much of a chance to show off the title I just claimed, to work



as the Ryuo, makes me kind of sad.

The summons came just as it was starting to get to me.

—Simply put ..... Work fit for the Ryuo (me) finally came!

I've always been told: *We realize you are the Ryuo, but there aren't any jobs we can leave in the hands of someone as inexperienced as you.* Now, it's finally my turn.

That means the world has recognized me as a top Shogi player.

I can't go into this halfheartedly. Once I do this one to perfection, I'll work hard so that clients will be lining up to hire me!

The chairman, who once held several titles himself, must've picked up on my enthusiasm because he straightens his posture and says in a meaningful tone, "Now, for the first order of business——."

“.....!”

*Gulp!* I swallow all the spit in my mouth and wait for his next words on the edge of my seat.

The first job to come for me as the Ryuo is—.

“The monthly magazine *The Younger Companion* would like to conduct an interview with you.”

“Why in the heck?!!”

I take a dig at the Eternal Meijin with all my might. Why in the heck?!!!!

The chairman's grin didn't budge at all as he says, "Perhaps that question is better directed at yourself?"

"You're saying I have a Lolita complex, right?! That I'm a lolicon, yeah?! Well, I'm telling you here and now that I am not at aaaaaaa!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

*Pant ..... pant ..... pant .....*

The chairman ignores my heaving shoulders and says, “Are you feeling better?”

“..... A bit.”

“Well, what is your answer?”

“No! Please turn them down!”

“That’s unfortunate.”

He sighs, sounding disappointed. He was enjoying every second of that, wasn’t he .....?

“Moving on to the second order of business——.”

Every fiber of my being is sure that he’s going to throw another loli-type job request at me, but it turned out to be something even more surprising.

“Your supervision has been requested for the production of a video game.”

“..... A game?”

“Yes. Requests involving video games are not all that uncommon, and the association would like to comply with these requests as much as possible.”

“Oh, really?”

“Shogi itself is a game, yes? I myself served as a supervisor for the original Nintendo release of *Seiichi Tsukimitsu’s Shogi Instructor*.”

“It received 3 popularity rating!” Ms. Oga adds like she’s bragging about her own accomplishment. You weren’t even born when that system came out .....

“Do you partake in video games, Ryuo?”

“Well, I don’t hate them, and my Master has been playing a few on his smartphone recently.”

“Then there should be no problem. May I put the request through?”

“That’s fine, but ..... There are many types of video games out there, right?”

What kind of game is it?”

I’m pretty sure it involves Shogi somehow, but the game concept could change what I would have to do quite a bit.

“Good question. The client seems to want to discuss details in person.”

“May I ask where the company is?”

“Kobe. The company name is *YMM Online*——.”

“Say what?! Those guys are huge!”

Even someone like me who knows next to nothing about games has come across their name as one of the fastest growing Internet-based companies.

They focus mainly on developing games for smartphones.

Back when I was in junior high, my classmates talked about their stuff all the time .....

“What would such a big-name company want with me? Is it because I’m the Ryuo?”

“While I’m not sure of that——.”

The chairman silently shakes his head like he knows something else before saying, “You’re very familiar with this particular client, Ryuo.”

Someone that ..... I know?



The next day.

“This is the place ..... So, there’s a game developer in Kobe.”

Fresh off the train at Kobe Station, I walk into a beautifully designed office building and explain my situation to the woman at the reception desk. From

there, I get on the elevator and go up to the floor she told me to go to.

When people think of video game developers in Kansai, the really famous one is in Kyoto. You know, with the monsters ..... in pockets, or the Italian ..... plumber?

“While it’s nowhere near that big, this company looks more legit than I thought.”

Which is exactly why they could call on the Ryuo.

After all, there’s no way some newbie Shogi pro would get asked to oversee a video game.

“What the chairman said is still bugging me, though. The request came from somebody I know ..... Do I know anyone in the gaming industry?”

I mean, I never went to high school and all my former classmates are still high school students. The only adults I know are involved in Shogi somehow.

Who in the world could they be?

The person waiting for me in the office was—the last one I expected to see.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Welcome to my company.”

“Huh?! ..... Akira?”

A 20-year-old woman in a sharp, black suit.

Akira Ikeda.

She’s my apprentice Ai Yashajin’s bodyguard and caretaker.

..... At least, I thought that’s what she did.

“What’s bothering you, *Sensei*? Is it so strange to see me working in an office?”

“No, well ..... I thought you shadowed Ai 24/7 .....”

“What do you take me for? Doing so would be the actions of a simple

degenerate.”

Well, not far off .....

“Though I serve as the lady’s guardian, I cannot accompany her while she is attending school and the company is not so well off it can afford to let me sit on my thumbs during that time.”

“Ahhh ..... I got you.”

She makes a pretty good point.

Ai Yashajin’s grandfather owns pachinko parlors and his own production agency now but used to be a yaku ..... [*cough, cough!*] B-Businessman! Yes, he was a businessman.

Akira is his employee. Of course she’d work.

“Thus, I was ordered to incorporate the younger generation into our business plan and started with this video game company.”

“Akira, you can program computers and that kind of stuff?”

“Not in the least. I have no involvement in that sector.”

Say what? Then, how does she make games?

“I am, however, rather gifted at encouraging others to follow up on promises and pay back their loans. Those skills are getting put to good use. Game development itself is outsourced to another company.”

“I-I see .....

Things are turning dark real quick, so I cut the conversation short and get to the point.

“Now you’re making a Shogi game ..... Correct? Of course, I’d love to help! If there’s anything I can do, just name it!”

“Yes, concerning that very point——.”

“Of course, I’ll be a supervisor for the Shogi part, but I can be in the commercials, go on TV to do promotion, anything you ask, too!”

“Listen, *Sensei*. Wait——.”

“Oh! What about the title? *Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu’s Secret Shogi Arts* or *Yaichi Kuzuryu’s Shogi Instructor* would be cool ..... Or would something simple like *Kuzuryu Shogi* be better?”

“Oi.”

“Then again, it’s a mobile game, right? The name needs to be easy to abbreviate, yeah? Having *wars* or *quest* or *lord* or a word like that in there would make it——.”

“I’m telling you to cool your jets.”

“Yes?”

“Who said we’re making a Shogi-centered game?”

“Come again?”

Staring at the blank look on my face, Akira sounds perplexed when she asks, “Why must we create a game for such a narrow niche of die-hard maniacs?”

M-Maniacs?

What is she talking about .....?

“The ideal mobile game needs to be unisexually accessible to all ages with no need for prior knowledge. Shogi rules are quite complicated, and the average match lasts much too long for a mobile game. The content is a horrible match for the medium.”

“But, you know ..... There are a few Shogi games for smartphones .....”

They’re hits, too, by the sound of it.

“Well yes, they do exist, but I doubt several games in that genre will be successful at once. In fact, many Shogi-based apps have failed within the first

few months of their release.”

“.....”

A well-reasoned explanation, and from Akira of all people. I’m stunned speechless.

I could’ve sworn ..... she was a blockhead with a strange appreciation for little girls but it turns out she’s actually pretty smart ..... It’s hard to believe she can’t keep Shogi rules straight .....

“B-But ..... Why did you want me involved?”

“I bought your non-Shogi expertise, *Sensei*.”

“My ..... non-Shogi expertise .....?”

What could that be?

I realize how pathetic this sounds, but Shogi is all I have. Take that away from me, and I’m just some good-for-nothing teenager who didn’t finish school. I don’t have any skills that would benefit society at all .....

Akira puts on a serious face and tells me.

“We have not known each other for long, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. However, I believe that time to have been extremely fruitful. I have identified a unique talent of yours, *Sensei* ..... A talent unrelated to Shogi.”

“Akira .....”

She’s going to make me cry ..... There’s no greater compliment for a Shogi player than for someone they’ve sat across the board from to recognize their skills. If there’s anything I can do to help make this game a success, I sure as hell am going to do it.

“And? What kind of game will make use of this talent of mine that’s unrelated to Shogi?”

“The theme is ..... *a younger companion!*”

“You’re going to treat me like some kind of lolicon, too?!”

That’s a far more maniacal *niche* than Shogi!

Actually, depending on how it’s done, it could be illegal?!

My screams must’ve been nothing but a light breeze to Akira because she shoots down all my objections with logic.

“You are, in a sense, a professional gamer and are quite gifted at raising young girls as well. No matter how much inborn talent she possessed, you have taken Ai Hinatsuru from a complete novice and transformed her into a formidable opponent in a very short time. As one who also has a young girl in her care, I admire your prowess.”

“Do you ..... really think so?”

I won’t deny that Shogi players have a knack for beating video games, and many of us are gamers. A few have done collaborations with games in the past.

Recently, one player took the stage in a game called *werewolf* and others have uploaded footage of themselves playing video games on the Internet. If I remember right, Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan* is really into one of those deck-building card games and he’s good enough at it to turn pro .....

I’m happy to be recognized for my teaching skills, too.

A lot of it is trial and error with me trying to figure out how to develop the talent Ai Hinatsuru already has, but all the hard times are worth it in the end.

“But, something just doesn’t feel right about this.”

“Now, now, *Sensei*. You’ve already taken the time to come to Kobe. At least read the synopsis before making your decision.”

“I suppose .....

I sit down on a rather expensive-looking sofa and take the papers Akira hands me.



The title on the first sheet in the pile is——.

“Lolicon Go.”

“.....”

I think I’m going to be sick .....

“This game is revolutionary. Prepare yourself. The story and the real world ..... are conjoined into one!”

“.....”

“Using the smartphone’s GPS, young girls randomly appear on side streets and vacant lots.”

“..... And? What do you do with these girls?”

“Capture them by throwing a ball-like device.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOPE—————!!!!”

I jump up from the sofa making a big X with my arms. That’s strike one.

Akira doesn’t seem to agree.

“Huh? And just what is unacceptable?”

“Where do I begin?! Problems are bursting out all over like an overstuffed doughnut!! Scrap the thing, now!!”

“The original concept was to capture them using a van rather than a ball.”

“You can’t be serious?!”

“In pursuit of realism.”

“Waaaaay too real! Police will get involved!”

You’ll end up on the news!

“Indeed. Those concerns did arise, which is why we changed the capturing method to a ball instead. Other game features include hatching young girls from eggs by walking——.”

“Hatching?! These girls hatch from eggs?!”

“They do. We explored many concepts, but this seemed to be the most reasonable method. As children playing this game is a possibility, we thought more realistic means would be too grotesque.”

Oh?

This is more grotesque if you ask me.

“B-But ..... Who is the game for? I don’t think normal people would consider rounding up a bunch of little girls to be fun .....”

“Extra girls can be put on standby in a *hotel*.”

“.....”

“Furthermore, once a large number of the same young girl have been acquired, they can be sent to a *facility* to become lollipops. Giving these lollipops to the girls you want to raise will help them *evolve* into even stronger young girls!”

“What exactly does *stronger* mean in this case?”

“They become smaller and more adorable.”

That’s not evolution. It’s regression.

“For adult players who find it too time-consuming, they have the option to *purchase* young girls.”

“Oh HEEEEEEEEELL NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“What’s wrong, *Sensei*? You seem riled up.”

Word choice! Word choooice!!

“Please, get rid of the *purchase* thing right now!”

“And how do you propose we make a profit without micro-transactions?”

“Then come up with something more appropriate! Like maybe ..... *allowance* or something like that .....”

“Isn’t that a far more dubious choice for the word?”

“Crap, you’re right! But, seriously, anything sounds dubious if you’re combining money with little girls!”

That’s two strikes. I’m so close to bailing.

“In that case, why don’t we have users purchase *orbs* instead? That way, they can trade the orbs for the young girls or power up items. Would that be acceptable?”

“Well ..... In that case .....”

That just makes the suspect transactions harder to track, the same logic as money laundering.

It has the slightest ... teeny tiny chance of getting by, but .....

If enough effort goes into fixing that problem, the game just might make it to release. So long as something else doesn’t deliver the strike out first .....

“So? What’s the gameplay system like?”

“Users visit parks and schools, so-called *Loli-Stops*——.”

“Strike three! YOU’RE OUT!!”

I crumple up the papers in my hand and hurl the mangled ball straight into the trash. I put so much heat on it that my right leg flies over my head as my right arm sweeps over the floor.

That’s three strikes. Game, set, match. Put this game on ice.

“But why? There is a very real issue with pointing cameras at actual young

girls, but no such issues exist in virtual reality, correct?”

“The thing would literally draw all the pervs right to schools and parks!!”

Just thinking about what a swarm of creepy old guys standing outside of a grade school with their smartphones out would look like is enough to know this game would get absolutely destroyed online. It wouldn’t have a prayer.

“Just no, okay?! Release something like this and every single organization in the country will hound you to shut it down from day one!”

“Mgh ..... I thought it would become a trend.”

It’ll be a *trend* all right.

A trend of the very bad kind!

Akira seems to have another argument ready. She puckers her lips for a moment before trying it out.

“If, per se, this game were to help shut-ins leave their homes and work their way back into society, wouldn’t that be good for everyone involved?”

“Lolicons should not be let out of their homes, ever.”

“Hearing you say it, you may have a point.”

Looking slightly dejected, Akira places her own stack of papers into the trashcan and says, “And now to the main proposal. This is the reason I called you here today.”

“What the ..... Seriously?! Akira, lead with that one, will you?”

“Hahaha. Sorry, I just wanted to surprise you.”

“Oh, you prankster. Hahaha!”

The air clears right away.

That totally insane proposal had to be what people in this business call a *throwaway plan*.

Whenever they have a proposal they absolutely want to get accepted, bringing up a totally hopeless proposal first to help lower the bar makes it easier for the main proposal to pass. Aren't I well-informed? It's a good thing I did some research before coming.

"And? What is this next game about?"

"It's a rhythm action game."

"Another one that has nothing to do with Shogi ....."

I'm really beginning to wonder why I'm here ..... Well, I was already clueless when *Lolicon GO* came up, but still .....

Wouldn't Master Kiyotaki be better for this? He's always playing something on his phone these days and he's at least challenged the Meijin twice.

With so many unanswered questions on my mind, I turn to Akira and ask, "And? What's the title?"

"*Loli-Live!*"

Too direct .....

"Other names like *Child Master* were up for consideration, but it's that kind of musically oriented game."

"I get the idea. Not much of one, but an idea."

It's better when the title makes the game content obvious.

*Loli-Live* will be much easier for customers to consider picking up.

"Actually, I've already had several character models constructed for this project. Therefore, it would be much faster to show you this video than have you read the synopsis."

"Oh?"

Akira types a few things into her laptop before turning it around to show me the screen.

It draws me in immediately.

There's a little girl in a dress walking around, but she looks so real.

"Whoa ..... What a cute one!"

The girl on the screen is just so adorable the words spill right at my mouth.

She must be, I don't know, five?

She's small but I can tell she has a really strong personality, the type I like.

*"Go away, stupid head!"*

*"It's time to play horsey. You are my horsey, so crawl on all fours!"*

*"Y-you're nothing special, okay? I'm just playing with you!"*

A tiny little lisp, but so commanding. There's so much charm to her. Talk about a heartthrob.

But, this girl looks familiar .....

"She looks a lot like Ai Yashajin, don't you think? Her face for sure, but her voice and subtle movements line up pretty well."

"That's because this is my lady."

"Huh?"

"This character model was built using her pictures from kindergarten as a reference. Her movements were all designed based on home videos taken at the time. Of course, the voice segments are audio recordings of my lady's voice from back then."

"W-Why would you come up with something like this?!"

"But of course, because I want to nurture my lady at any time, any place!" she declares, clenching her fist.

Oh boy .....

I should've known this person was too far gone .....

“The inspiration behind this game was when I was waiting for my lady to return from elementary school, thinking *Ahh, I can’t wait to see her again ..... I can’t wait to tease her again ..... and began playing a rhythm game on my phone to pass the time. The idea came to me when I realized the game would be perfect if my lady were a playable character.*”

“That’s just what you want, don’t you think .....?”

Then again, games that catch on typically cater to what people want.

I look back at the screen and take a moment to observe Lady Ai Yashajin in virtual reality.

*“Don’t lean in with that gross face! Stupid head!”*

“.....”

The girl snaps at me the moment my nose got close to the screen.

Yep, this is Ai Yashajin alright. Not friendly at all .....

But, at the same time, watching her warm up to me little by little and do what I ask even while complaining, closing the distance bit by bit ..... I might get hooked.

Hmmm .....

This might .....

“Honestly ..... You might have something here!”

“I just knew you would understand!”

*Smack!* Our hands come together in a hearty handshake.

I mean, can you blame me? That’s too damn adorable.

Even that proud, domineering Lady Ai Yashajin used to be this cute and innocent .....

And, thinking I can raise her any way I want .....

Dress her in any outfit, have her sing any song or teach her to dance .....

“Just, wow!! This is amazing!!”

After going through hell trying to figure out how to interact with her, thinking up all these little details .....

No! The possibilities are endless!

“Akira! This will sell!”

“Of course it will! My lady can monopolize the entire market! She shall reign supreme!!!!!!!!!! My lady, my lady, MY LAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAADDDDYYYYYYYYYY ———.”

“Relax!! Okay?! Just ... just take a deep breath!!!”

Akira got so excited that blood (–) starts dripping out of her nose. Hastily stuffing tissues into her nostrils, she asks between shallow breaths.

“*S-Sensei* ..... What do you say? Will you work with me to create the perfect game?”

“..... Alright. Akira, I will join you.”

“Let’s do this.”

“Let’s do this.”

That’s how it went.



From that night, we slept in the office and totally immersed ourselves in designing the game!

“*Sensei*. Are you certain you can put off your Shogi research?”

“I can research Shogi any time. But little girls can only be loved while they’re little.”



“You truly are scum of a human being, *Sensei* ..... But, that’s what I like about you.”

Exchanging a grin and laughing with our eyes, our hands never stop moving. There wasn’t a single second to waste. Because, seriously, girls grow up .....

Development hit every wall imaginable!

We’d design the game, discuss what it was about Ai Yashajin’s behavior that really tugged at the heartstrings, make *tonjiru* pork miso soup, argue about what outfits we could make Ai wear that would get the most enthusiastic response, design more of the game, make more soup, throw punches at each other trying to decide Ai’s best icy rebuke, make more soup and mend fences ..... Neither of us took a single step outside the office for days.

We came so close to disaster many times——.

“Damn it! I can’t decide which school backpack suits my lady the best!”

“I found it, Akira! This year’s backpack catalog!!”

“Well done, *Sensei*!”

But we always managed to find the decisive move to turn the tables back from the brink!

Making video games is just like Shogi. You have to be gritty, stubborn and strong. So long as you consistently strive to find the best move, even the problems that seemed impossible can be solved!

Then, at long last——.

“..... The Master App!”

It must’ve been quite a few days after we started working .....

I’d lost all track of time after many sleepless nights and hours and hours of hard work had left me in a daze.

It all became worth it the moment I saw the game on the screen in the early

morning sunlight ..... It's the same feeling of accomplishment I get when I win a match ... no, that I got when I claimed my title.

“As soon as this goes live .....

“We will, no doubt, revolutionize the mobile gaming industry .....

The two of us share a strong handshake.

The game we've created is perfect. There aren't any weak spots no matter how you look at it.

We went with the title *Ai—dle Master (temporary)* so that it would catch customers' eyes while putting Lady Ai Yashajin in the spotlight.

We fixed the time and budget problems by making her the only playable character.

To make up for it, the outfits, songs and physics engine are all extraordinary.

We hired the best loli-style illustrator money could buy to design all the outfits, included music from rock 'n' roll to J-pop to nursery rhymes, anything people would think a little girl singing would be *cute* is in this game. Absolute perfection!

Opening up my smartphone, I say, “Preorders are already flowing in! Putting that demo video up on Twitter sent her adorableness all around the globe ..... This is going to change the world.”

My fingers tremble scrolling through the comments on Twitter.

Fingers that don't even flinch during big matches, trembling .....

Akira starts suggesting possibilities for our next project.

“Profits from this game will allow us access to the newest technologies, so let's attempt to develop a virtual reality game! I will create an environment where full interaction with my lady in 3D will become a reality!!”

“Holy! You are something else, Akira! Just, wow!”

Just imagine how many people would never go outside again if we made that?! The thing would churn out lolicons by the hundreds!! It would be like anime-based natural selection!!

Are we ..... charging right toward a lolicon Pandora's box that should never be touched .....?

"I can see it now! All that remains is receiving my lady's permission for release. Let's go at once!"

"Say what?"

My voice jumping up a full octave, I turn to Akira in disbelief and ask just to make sure.

"Huh? Hold up. .... You haven't gotten the okay from Ai ..... yet?"

"Obviously. Informing her of this project beforehand would do nothing but spur anger and rebuke."

G-Good point .....!

*"Huuh? Why did you make this disgusting thing without asking? Take responsibility for this and die."*

I can just see her saying something like that.

Hm? Wait.

The thought didn't cross my mind when we were in the zone, but ..... Is this checkmate?

"Why are you so anxious? We have created a perfect rendering of my lady in digital form!! She will surely see that for herself! Yes?!"

"You ..... could be right!"

Ahh! What was I so worried about?

Our devotion and enthusiasm would never come through on a synopsis.

That enthusiasm has been made into something physical ..... I just know Ai will understand!



“Huuh? You made this disgusting thing behind my back? This is creepy!”

From the very second we showed her the game, Ai glares at it like finding puke on the street and gives us a piece of her mind.

Akira collapses, coughing up blood.

Rushing to her aid on the floor, I plead with Ai to see things our way.

“D-Don’t ..... be so hasty, Ai! For Akira and I, for every person around the world who has a soft spot for little girls, this is a dream come true!”

“Gross. Take responsibility and die.”

“ .....

Sliced right down the middle, what’s left of me shrieks in silence. Akira is face down on the floor, a puddle of blood steadily growing around her head like a rising sun .....

We went a little overboard okaying things in development, thinking *let’s do something big!* and jumping right in, but ..... Now that I’ve got a chance to think about it rationally, using an actual little girl’s private videos as the basis for a video game is beyond creepy .....

“You’re going to delete every single file, got it?”

Ai also demanded that Akira also destroy all the pictures and videos she had in her possession, but the two of us got on all fours, bowing so low that our heads nearly went through the floor to convince her to let Akira keep them.

“..... She got angry at us.”

“..... She sure did.”

A few days later.

Akira and I are sitting side-by-side on a bench in Harborland, an area just a stone's throw south of Kobe Station, and reminiscing about the whirlwind that was our time working on the game while watching ships set sail.

After incurring Ai's wrath, Akira's company is in a deadlock.

They moved out of the office building and deleted all the data just as she was told ..... It's all gone like a popped bubble in the middle of the ocean .....

“..... However, this might be for the better.”

“Huh?”

Why .....

I ask her with a glance and Akira mumbles while watching the ship disappear beyond the horizon.

“When I first dreamt ..... *Cough, cough!* E-Envisioned that game, my lady had shut herself off from the outside world.”

“Ah .....

Once she said it, it clicked.

Once Ai's parents passed away ..... She became obsessed with playing Shogi by herself after that.

“However, my lady has been much more apt to show emotion as of late.”

Akira tells me how Ai getting angry is actually a good thing.

“Compared to the time when her parents were living, it doesn't happen nearly as often. Nevertheless, seeing her so passionate, even in anger ..... makes me happy to see.”

“Akira .....

Memories start coming back to me.

The day I first sat across the board from Ai. All the trips the three of us made to New World. Ai’s Practice League Entrance Exam when she fought against both Keika and Ai Hinatsuru.

The joy on her face when she won a match and the pain when she lost.

There are certain things you just can’t experience without sitting across from a real opponent.

Shogi is reintroducing her to the emotions she could never experience playing all by herself ..... Just like when her parents were teaching her how to play when they were alive.

Her not showing any interest in this game ... is because Shogi is all she thinks about now, and that’s something to be happy about.

“So ..... Thank you, *Sensei*. I’m glad to know that my lady is in good hands.”

“..... Thanks.”

This kind of top-player work might still be a bit too much for me. My first attempt definitely ended in failure.

But I can’t fail in my job as Ai’s Master. I have to raise her the right way.

When it comes to that, no matter how difficult things get, no matter how many people tell me to give up ..... I’ll never throw in the towel.

Not until the day she’s a full-fledged Women’s League member in her own right.

Until the day she laughs for real, not some fake simulation in the game.

Because—The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!

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YAMASHIRO OUKA TITLE MATCH 4





“..... And that’s what happened.”

“A good ..... story? Is that?”

Machi looks like she’s on the fence about it.

Huh? Did I miss the mark?

I thought it all came together really nice at the end .....

“Is this Akira you spoke of the one who accompanies Ten-chan to the association wearing sunglasses?”

“That’s her. She’s basically Ai Yashajin’s bodyguard, but she got hooked on Shogi at some point during all her trips back and forth.”

“Hmmn.”

She seems to be implying something as she picks up a somewhat large stone and skips it across the Kamo River and says, “Ryuo-san, the two of you are on good enough terms to work together?”

“I just told you about our first time, but ..... She did send me a message saying, *Let’s try again, this time without the lolis!* a while back and we’ve been exchanging ideas. She’s not the easiest to work with when Ai is involved, but we make a pretty good team.”

If only her love for Lady Ai Yashajin didn’t send her off the deep end, I think she’d be a valuable asset. But, yeah, love is a strange thing. Can’t do anything about it .....!

“I’m a title holder again this season after defending my place as the Ryuo. As a top player, I’ll get to do all different kinds of jobs. It’s just something top players have to deal with.”

What a drag. I don’t get why top players have to do all these non-Shogi-

related jobs, but at least they're fun. A drag, but fun.

I tried venting my frustration about it, but Machi—.

"That being the case, would you join me for non-Shogi-related work should I be successful in my own defense tomorrow?"

"What?"

Coming out of nowhere, her request leaves me stunned.

"I don't ..... have any problem working with you any time, Machi, Shogi-related or not."

"That settles it. Pinkie swear with me, pinkie swear. Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!"

"Hm? Why'd you put so much emphasis on the die and needle part .....? You'll tell me what the job is beforehand, right?!"

"Venues for romantic tours of Kyoto. A local magazine has hired me to write such an article."

"Ah, that should be alright ....."

This kind of thing needs a guy's opinion as well. All I'd have to do is join her on a trip around Kyoto and just give my thoughts as we go along. Piece of cake!

Or so I thought.

"Photographs are also a must, so we shall be posing together as models as well."

"We what?!"

M-me?! A model?!

"I c-c-c-can't do that! Pictures of us looking like a couple would show up in a magazine, right?! J-just think about what people who see that might say .....!!"

"What is the issue? You are simply modeling."

“Oh, no no no no, it’s no good. Not good at all, okaaaay .....?”

Ai Hinatsuru would suspect things, for sure.

Big Sis would smack me, for sure.

Ai Yashajin’s disdain for me would go up another level if she saw it.

And Keika would say something like, “Oh my, Yaichi. I can’t take my eyes off you for a minute, can I?” like a mother who just saw her son getting busy with his girlfriend. Keika, my heart only belongs to you .....!

“I can’t do that, got it?! I won’t make that promise!!”

“That may be so, but you have already pinkie sworn to it.”

“B-But .....”

“The promise shall be void in the event that I am unsuccessful tomorrow. I believe these are fair terms, no?”

“They’re fair ..... But .....”

“Ryuo-san, do you believe that I shall prevail against *O-Ryou*?”

“..... I did until just a moment ago, but now I *want* you to lose.”

“You tease.”

I tried to get her to change her mind so many times walking back to the hotel, but Machi didn’t take the promise back.



“Here .....?!”

The next day.

Ai Hinatsuru freezes the moment she sees the arena on the Kamo River bank and squeals.

“They’re going to play Shogi here?!”

“Talk about impressive .....

I couldn’t see much at all in the dark last night, but now that it’s in the sun .....  
They really went all out. I’m not the only one here thinking so.

“What’s that over there?”

“Kabuki, maybe? But, what’s with that wooden thing in the middle?”

“Shogi ..... Perhaps?”

“Are those young women in kimonos going to do Shogi?”

“Wow! They’re gorgeous!”

The board right in the middle of the stage and the two ladies sitting on either side of it are already drawing a crowd. People are lining up on the Sanjyo Ohashi Bridge and on the Shijyo Ohashi Bridge as well as along the river banks in the Sanjyo and Shijyo areas for a better look.

Even the locals are impressed while the foreigners are walking around with wide eyes and taking pictures left and right ..... I bet this scenery is spreading out around the world right now.

Just, wow ..... They have to play Shogi like this .....?

“We can’t just stand and stare. It’s our job to do analysis on the big board.”

“Uwheeee?!”

“Of course, we won’t be on that stage. But, there’ll be plenty of people looking at us, too. We need to psych ourselves up for this one .....!”

Each player has two hours of waiting time on a chess clock for the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match.

Which means that the match will go on for at least four hours if both of them use all their time. One-minute Shogi rules kick in after that. All told, the match could take more than five hours if the battle really heats up.



“Considering there’s a lunch break and then interviews to do after the match is over, it’d be a good idea to plan on today taking about 10 hours. This is your first big job as a Woman’s League player, Ai.”

“Y-Yes .....!!”

She won her first official league match, but she looks a lot more nervous now before this event than she did during that match. When you’re playing, nerves go away once the match starts .....

She and I did some big board analysis at the Kansai Association a while back, but she switched out before we could talk about a single move ..... I’m sure that sounds confusing, and I still don’t know exactly what happened ..... It certainly wasn’t hypnosis or some cheap, speedy trick. I caught a glimpse of something much, much scarier .....

“This is a great chance for you to practice doing commentary, so take my instructions to heart.”

“Yes! I’m ready for you to teach me .....!!”

The commentary stage is set up on an embankment not too far from the arena where the match will take place. The audience can see us easily and we have a good view of the arena because we’re higher up than the crowd.

All they did was block off the road and line up some folding chairs in front of the big board, but Kyoto’s scenery is so perfect that this is all they needed to do to make everything look good.

Walking side by side, I explain some things to my open-eared apprentice.

“What we’re doing today is basically the same as normal big board analysis except that the players are much closer to the audience and commentators this time because it’s a public match.”

“Will they be able to hear us?”

“Yes. Never forget that.”

Apparently, the players won't be able to hear much of anything since the stage is so close to the Kamo River today ..... Even so, we need to be careful how we phrase things.

"Whenever there's a live audience like this or when commentators and players are on the same stage, it's common etiquette for the commentators to avoid saying specific places on the board. Also, it's necessary to use open-ended words like *this here* or *that there* without mentioning the offender or defender at all. The next thing we need to watch out for is how the audience reacts. We can be extremely careful but that won't mean a thing if someone in the audience blurts out the specific place we're trying not to say."

"..... There are so many rules to remember. (>-<)"

"It'll be fine. They'll be so focused on the match that the players won't hear anything going on around them."

"Fuwawa ....."

Ai's nerves and confusion have reached the point her eyes are spinning. Seriously, I can hear her knees crackling from here .....

Yeah. This isn't good.

She won't be able to say anything if I scare her too much, but I can't have her going up there without any nerves at all. The best-case scenario would be to find a way to put a positive spin on the pressure, but .....

Just as my train of thought reaches that point.

"Aaaaiiii!"

"Ah! Mio! And everyone, too ....."

The little girl slipping through the crowd to get right up to us is Ai's Shogi friend and classmate Mio Mizukoshi.

Right behind her are Ayano Sadatou, another girl her age, and Charlette Isoir, three years younger than the rest.

Combined with Ai Hinatsuru, these four friends make up the Grade Schooler Practice Group.

“Heh-heh! We came to cheer you on!!”

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, Ai, I’m looking forward to your analysis.”

“You are awnnouncers!”

Once Mio, Ayano and Charlette say what they wanted to say,...

“E-Everyone ..... Thank you so much!”

Relief washing over her, tears build up in Ai’s eyes as she wraps her arms around Charlette in a big hug. Finding herself in Ai’s embrace, Charlette tilts her head with a surprised “Oh?” and hugs her too, giving Ai a few pats on the back. Man, that’s adorable.≡

Seriously, though ..... We dodged a bullet .....

There’s nothing more reassuring than having someone you know within earshot at times like this.

Commentating is so much easier when someone, anyone gives a little nod of recognition. Please remember that next time you go to a Shogi event.

“Thanks for coming, everybody! I’ll try to get some seats in the front row set aside for you, so give Ai plenty of support today!”

“Yay!”

Happy, smiling little girls. I want to protect those smiles.

I flag down one of the staffers running around doing final preparations.

“Sorry to bother you. These girls are with me. Two of them are part of the Kansai Practice League and the third attends the association’s Children’s Shogi School. Would it be possible to have them seated in the front row?”

“Oh, with the Ryuo ..... Please wait for a minute.”



Even though it's right before the match, the busiest time slot of the day, the staffer just smiles and helps me without a single complaint.

He gets another staffer standing a little way away from me to check into it——.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei's* .....?”

“Elementary school girls, yes .....”

“But, the seats are .....”

“The VIP seats .....”

I can only catch a few words, but one of the ones I do catch I certainly can't ignore. I yell out to them.

“VIP seats?! That's okay, you don't have to go that far .....”

“No, no. These seats were prepared in advance for your small friends. Chairman Tsukimitsu ordered these arrangements personally.”

“The chairman? Seats for my small friends .....?”

Maybe they're trying to encourage more kids to come to Shogi events by having smaller chairs available?

But, looking around, there's a ton of kids riding piggyback on their fathers' shoulders in the crowd.

What's going on here? I feel like we're not talking about the same thing .....

“Um, I would like to have some seats set aside for my apprentice's friends.”

“Yes. Which is why VIP seats have been prepared for them.”

“..... Back up for just a moment please. VIPs are important people, right? Politicians or event organizers, right?”

“Normally yes, but not in this case.”

“In this case? And what does VIP mean .....?”

“Very Important Prepubescent.”

Very important prepubescent?!

“It means *young girls of considerable importance*.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to figure out.”

I’m drawing a total blank here.

What in the world is going on .....?

“In layman’s terms, Chairman Tsukimitsu issued a memo stating that Kuzuryu-*sensei* will be accompanied by young girls when attending events and to always have extra chairs on hand. The arrangement has been approved by the Shogi Association and all branches around the country have been informed.”

“Huh? Let me get this straight. The whole Shogi world is in on this? Even the branch associations ..... Got it .....?”

“Naturally. Kuzuryu-*ryuo* is worthy of being treated as the Shogi world’s top priority after not only defending the Dragon King Ryuo title but advancing to C-1 in the placement matches as well. Even the Meijin himself has said that you *are the strongest right now*. As these young female friends of yours are what you hold most dear, it’s synonymous for us as the Shogi Association to hold them in the same esteem.”

It’s not synonymous. Definitely not synonymous.

I have to stop this *VIP treatment* before it spreads. If it does, it’ll be a disaster. Well, I’m sure it’s already spread, but as soon as word gets out that I actually let little girls sit in those seats, there’ll be no going back.

But, after seeing my *friends* already happily sitting in those chairs, I can’t refuse them .....

“Wow! It’s so soft and squishy! This chair is awesome!”

“Cha, Cha’s happy to bwe so cwose to Masta≡”

Mio and Charlette have already settled into the kiddy chairs, their elbows firmly planted on the armrests and happy as can be.

“Getting these chairs for us at the drop of a hat, you’re the best, Kujuryu-sensei!”

“Hah ..... hahaha. I’m glad you like them.”

Between the little girls smiling so hard their lips could fly off their faces and all the association staff looking at me with eyes that say: *Yep, he’s one of them lolicons alright*. I put on an expression just as unreadable as the Mona Lisa.

“I’m in the front row, so call on me each time one of those next moves quizzes comes up! I want all those prizes!”

“G-Go easy now, Mio. It’s one per person, okay .....?”

I’m glad to see the girls are all so excited, but rumors will start flying if people find out that I was handing out the quiz prizes like presents to little girls I know personally. Everyone will start treating me like a lolicon for sure.

“It’s not like I can get VIP presents for VIP guests, now can I .....?”

“Master? What does VIP mean?”

“A very important person.”

I answer my apprentice in the coolest tone I could muster and turn toward the VIP chairs (I don’t want to call them that, but I can’t think of anything else) and focus on something at the end of the row that had been bugging me.

“.....”

Right between the excited girls, one of them looks too nervous to say anything at all.

Ayano.

A 10-year-old girl, she lives in Kyoto and attends the classroom that her Master, Kayaoku-sensei runs while traveling to Osaka to go to the association.

Today, her elder sister apprentice is sitting up at the board to defend her title.

I crouch down next to her and say as gently as I can, “You’re rooting for Kugui-*sensei*, aren’t you, Ayano?”

“Of course I am.”

“Did you talk to her this morning?”

“No, I didn’t. But——.”

Ayano stares into her lap and squeezes the daylights out of her knees.

“I ..... believe Big Sister Machi is going to win.”

Her voice wavers a bit, but Ayano continues.

“Because, I know that she’s worked harder than anyone else .....”

“.....True.”

All I could do was nod.

Machi telling me about her struggles last night.

Ryou flaunting her victory at the press conference yesterday.

Both are going to affect today’s Shogi.

Just as the match that’s just about to start is going to affect Ayano, it’ll have an impact on all the Shogi fans and onlookers gathered here today.

While the players’ intensity is a given.

So many other people’s hopes are riding on it—the match to determine the victor is set to begin.



“L-Ladish and gentall ... men ..... Good mahorning!!”

So nervous that she ends up sounding like Charlette tripping over her words like that, Ai greets the audience with an energetic wave.

Murmurs race through the crowd immediately afterward.

“What’s this? A little girl is up there?”

“A grade schooler by the look of her.”

“You mean you don’t know? That’s Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 2-*kyu*. She’s a *Sensei* among *Senseis* in the Women’s League.”

“You’re kidding! That teeny tiny girl there?!”

Plenty of people in the surprised crowd are acting like Ai is a household name.

It seems Ai—Ms. Hinatsuru already has a big following.

Looking through the crowd, I see a couple of faces that always pop up at these events. It seems that my apprentice already has followers, some of whom are young men.

—I’d better do my job as her Master and ward them off before they get any ideas .....!

“Analysis will be done by Master ..... N-no, umm ..... uhhh .....”

“I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, will be doing the analysis today.”

Stepping in to save my apprentice before she freezes up entirely, I calmly say hello to the audience.

“As many people here today may be unaware, allow me to explain. Ms. Hinatsuru is my apprentice. I’m 17 and she’s 10, most likely making us the youngest Master and apprentice pair in Shogi history. We’ll do our best to live up to your expectations.”

“T-Thank you fwor coming today!!”

The crowd gives Ai a big round of applause even though she bit her tongue as she went into a bow.

As far as commentating goes, today is going to be on the harder side.

We have a decent view of the players and can kind of tell what move was made by the crowd's reaction, but we won't be able to see exactly what it was.

That's why it's necessary for Ai and me to check our smartphones for constant updates from the match recorder, Ms. Oga's tablet as we move the big board's pieces around. It looks like I'll have to lead .....

The time is 8:40 in the morning.

Chairman Tsukimitsu, working as the observer for today's match, Kyoto city officials and other higher-ups are already sitting boardside.

The match is about to start.

"This match, Match Three, will begin with a piece flip to decide who plays offense and defense. Umm, a piece flip is ..... picking up five Pawns with both hands like this, and shaking ....."

Microphone slipping out of her hand as Ai tried to show the audience how a piece flip was done, she chases after it, going "Uwhaaaaa?!" the whole way.

Mio jumps out of her chair and picks up the rolling microphone, but the crowd is already cheering for her.

This series of almost aggressively adorable events has the audience satisfied before the match even gets underway.

"Aiiii!"

"You're the cutest kid in the world!"

"Keep your chin up!"

And other voices of support keep coming.

"Oh no~ ..... The *Senseis* playing today need it quiet so they can focus and that's my job as a commentator ..... It's hard to do matches out in public ....."

The microphone finally back in her hands, Ai turns to me and says, "Mast ....."

No. Kuzuryu-*sensei*, what strategies do you think we'll see in today's match?"

"Well, don't forget I'm the analyst and Chairman Tsukimitsu is the observer. Since both of us are Move-Loss Bishop Exchange specialists ..... It'd be so nice for one of them to use it."

"I-I-I wouldn't know what to say!!"

That gets a few more laughs from the crowd as Ai panics a little.

The chance that Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, a strategy that only a handful of players use, will come up today is pretty much zero. But, my apprentice taking my little joke seriously is just so cute≡.

Oh, it's almost time for the match to start.

I should probably stop joking around and get to work.

"The challenger, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, is a member of the Static Rook party and, while Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui can be an all-rounder, she tends to prefer Ranging Rook strategies. I expect we'll get to see the two styles square off today."

"Kugui-*sensei* plays Ranging Rook offensively and Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei* plays Static Rook. I think so, too!"

"It's great knowing I have Hinatsuru-*sensei*'s seal of approval. A real confidence booster."

"Maaaster! Please don't tease me!"

The audience absolutely loves Ai's pouty face.

Now there's movement on the arena's stage.

Ms. Oga, the match recorder, opens a white cloth, grabs five of title holder Machi Kugui's Pawns and does the piece flip.

The pieces scatter and——

"Can you see? My eyes aren't the best in the world ....."

“Three Pawns are face up!!” Ai confirms with her set of eagle eyes.

“Kugui-*yamashiro ouka* will be playing as the offender and the challenger Tsukiyomizaka-*Women’s King* will be the defender!”

“Whew .....

A sigh of relief comes from Ayano in the front row.

It’s because offenders have a higher winning percentage, so she feels like the chances that Machi will win have gone up.

But, her relief didn’t last long.

Once both players start the match by opening their Bishop Paths ..... Machi plays a completely unexpected move just as the observer, Chairman Tsukimitsu, and the mayor of Kyoto leave the boardside table. She did it with authority, too.

Third move——2 Six Pawn.

“The Pawn in front of the Rook?! Is she using Static Rook?!”

Completely forgetting I was on stage, my genuine surprise slips through before I clear my throat and explain why that caught me off guard.

“Pardon me ..... I was certain that Ms. Kugui would choose to play a strategy she’s more familiar with to increase her chances of winning today .....

My prediction was way off.

Looking concerned, Ai asks me, “Is she trying to surprise her opponent?”

“I think she had her mind made up before the match. Otherwise, she would’ve used more waiting time to think it through.”

I think back to how she was last night.

Had she already decided to use the strategy at that point?

Or .....

“Big Sister Machi .....



Ayano sounds just as worried with her eyes glued on the big board.

For someone who admired Machi's playing style so much that she started playing Shogi and decided to learn Ranging Rook like Ayano ..... What's got to be going through her head right now?

But the surprises weren't over yet.

"Ah! Tsukiyomizaka-sensei closed her Bishop's Path!" says Ai, shocked.

Ryou closes the path she opened on her very first move by advancing her Pawn in the fourth column up one row on her next move.

I take the microphone away from my mouth and whisper, "Denying a Bishop exchange? A *yagura*, maybe .....?"

Ryou is known for her aggressive speed, so she almost never closes the Bishop Path.

—Maybe seeing Machi use Static Rook is making her cautious?

I thought maybe she was feeling indifferent because she ended up on defense, but ..... After seeing what she did soon after, I knew I was completely wrong.

"Huh?!"

Anyone who knew anything about Shogi gasped in surprise.

The 10th move.

Ryou picks up her Rook. *The Rook that can only move sideways right now.*

She slides down the board with all her might.

Ai yelps. I stare, speechless.

"She slid?!"

"Her Rook .....?"

I look at my smartphone over and over, but the match record indicating ♞ 4

Two Rook doesn't change.

——A closed Bishop Path Fourth-File Rook .....

This isn't Gokigen Central Rook or a Bishop Exchange Fourth-File Rook. It's the last thing anyone would expect Ryou to play based on her match records, a classic style of Normal Fourth-File Rook.

"S-Static Rook party member Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei*, moving her Rook like that ..... T-this is too unexpected!!" Ai squeals at the top of her lungs.

"..... Is this where it ends? Ryou, surely you have more."

I get the feeling that Ryou is still hiding something.

It will take a lot more than moving the Rook to shake Machi's confidence.

If she was willing to go this far, she's bound to have something else up her sleeve .....

The match progresses at breakneck speed while I'm thinking all this through, and each player's formation takes shape.

After sliding her Rook across, Ryou wastes no time getting her King to the edge of the board to fill the empty space.

Ai switches off her microphone and asks me, "Is that a Mino Castle?"

"Nah! It's too fast ..... Could she be?!"

As soon as Ryou's King arrives at 8 Two ...

Rather than moving her Silver sitting in the seventh column, she advances the piece two spaces away—the Lance that sits at the very edge of the board up one row.

That removes any remaining doubts.

"*Anaguma?!*"

Yes.

Ryou has decided to use a *Ranging Anaguma*.

But that's the exact strategy Machi is known for .....!

Who would've ever seen this coming?!

"A bold choice .....!"

I can feel my lips curving into a smile. There's no way to analyze this. That woman is something else.

With her microphone still off, Ai quietly asks, "..... Will it be a Double Anaguma?"

"Good question ..... But, it looks like Machi has a plan of her own as well ....."

No, not really a plan so much as *determination*.

As if trying to prove me right, Machi glares at Ryou's King hanging out at the corner of the board for a few minutes before making her move with conviction.

Machi's decision——7 Eight Silver.

"That's Left Mino. The chance we'll see Double Anaguma is pretty much gone ....."

Ranging Rook users often employ the Mino Castle, but it gets used by Static Rook players, too.

When that happens, the formation takes shape on the left side of the board rather than the right, which is why it's called a Left Mino. However, changing to an *anaguma* from there almost never happens ... though, the Silver Halo *Anaguma* could be an option .....

Ai moves the pieces on the big board before turning her microphone back on and saying, "Master ..... Kuzuryu-sensei. The offender's defense is looking like a Left Mino Castle ....."

“It’s a formation that Static Rook players once used as an Anti-Ranging Rook strategy. Much more flexible than an *anaguma*, it can be easily shifted to a High Mino Castle or a Silver Halo.”

“Does this mean Kugui-*sensei* will have to fight against her specialty, an *anaguma*?”

“It sure looks like it. We may find out how well Machi the Tormenter, someone who knows the ins and outs of *anagumas*, does when she has to deal with one herself ..... This will be interesting.”

While most of the crowd is still enamored with the spectacle of the kabuki stage, it looks like anyone who has any Shogi knowledge isn’t listening to anything I’m saying at all.

That’s how stunning her decision was.

“It seems both players have abandoned their own main strategies and instead decided to use their opponents’ strategies. As both of them have fought many times over the years and have researched each other down to the last detail ... they have deep respect for one another and recognize each other’s skills, which I think is why we’re seeing this here today,” I say, completely sure of myself as I explain.

This isn’t a simple ploy to catch their opponent off guard or to taunt them.

It’s just that I have no idea how this will turn out.

“Is there ..... any chance this will end in a tie?”

“Though a Repetition Draw is possible, stalemates almost never happen when both players’ defensive formations face each other like this. The winner will most likely be crowned in this match right here.”

“I-I’m so nervous .....!!”

Ai’s squeezing her microphone with both hands.

Mio is barely sitting on the edge of her seat in the front row and Ayano is pale

as a ghost. Seeing that, Charlette starts holding her hand in a show of support.

Each player is speeding through their moves almost as if each one knows exactly what the other is going to do beforehand.

Most likely, both of them think waiting time is going to be very important.

Since both are using strategies they don't have much experience with in league matches, the one with more waiting time toward the end will have the advantage. Skipping over the early game allows them to save time for the big clashes in the mid-game and to deliver the final blow in the late game.

Ai yelps the moment Machi picks up a piece out of her own formation.

"The Silver is now in front of the King!"

"The Silver Halo. It reinforces the area in front of the King but leaves the sides vulnerable."

"So, the offender Kugui-*sensei* is thinking the battle will happen in front of her King?!"

"I believe so, yes. If the match flows along with her plan, Ms. Kugui will have a distinct advantage. However, she will be in trouble if it doesn't. We'll have to wait and see how the mid-game unfolds."

Mid-game battles are the most difficult in Shogi.

They're completely different from the early game, where you can research, and the late game, where there's a definite answer. Without an answer, you have to use your waiting time efficiently to set up the most advantageous formation, all while preventing your opponent from doing the same, all in a limited amount of time.

In other words—the stronger one wins.



Sasari Oga watched the match from a closer vantage point than any other.

“.....”

She entered data into the tablet in front of her while manually writing down each move on match record paper ..... That was all her job entailed, and yet Sasari could hardly believe the exhaustion overtaking her.

It came from watching this contest of wills taking place before her eyes escalate far beyond a simple fistfight and transform into a duel to the death.

Machi Kugui employing a Silver Halo led Ryou Tsukiyomizaka to advance her Gold to the third row in order to reinforce her forward line.

Ryou intimidated her opponent by opening a Bishop Path, Machi closed it with a Pawn, sacrificing the piece to initiate combat herself. Seeing that, Ryou flexed her worldly muscles by bringing her Rook into the fifth column, but Machi responded by sending even more pieces to the front line as if begging for a fight.

“Grahhhh!!”

Ryou snapped her piece down on the 48th move much harder than any before.

In fact, she sent the Gold that was defending the third row directly into the fray. Although Ryou had an *anaguma* in place and was playing on defense, it looked as though she held the initiative to Sasari’s eyes.

—Attempting to defeat an opponent using their best strategy against them ..... That alone requires absolute confidence .....

*I’m gonna crush everything you think you are and hurl every last speck of what’s left out into outer space!!*

Ryou’s message was coming across with that much power.

Machi had been perfecting this strategy since her elementary school days, and it had become the very foundation of her existence in the Shogi world.

Should she execute that strategy better than Machi and take her title in the process ..... The damage would be unfathomable.

—Painful enough to never play Shogi again .....

On the other hand, Machi was not simply falling for the taunt.

Far from it. She was attempting to reinvent herself, to push beyond her limits by testing a new playing style. As if facing her former self—as if attempting to defeat the old *her* who depended solely on the *anaguma* ... and she was doing so head-on.

All to be born anew.

All to become stronger than before.

“..... Hot .....”

Sasari groaned.

The spring breeze along the river was chilly, but her skin beneath the kimono’s layers was sweltering as her heart feverishly pounded in her chest ..... An intense desire to play Shogi this very moment was setting in.

—One who long ago abandoned the life of a Women’s Shogi player such as I .....

Sasari Oga had once been a promising player who shouldered great expectations in the Women’s League.

Back when she made her debut as a junior high school student, she was certain she could contend with the younger Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui.

However, the two of them quickly rose to the top of the league ..... And each claimed a title for themselves.

—Having strong adversaries younger than oneself was ... exhausting ..... I could not endure.

In a world where youth is seen as an advantage ... like Shogi ... being older than a strong opponent is the equivalent of being forever destined to lose to them.

With the Eternal Queen Rina Shakando-*women's legend*, legendary by both title and reputation, looming in the generation above her own as well, Sasari chose early retirement.

Afterward, a new generation even younger than Ryou and Machi came to the forefront.

The first became known as Worldly Thunder: Empress Ika Sainokami.

Joining her was Naniwa's Snow White: Ginko Sora whose very existence challenged every assumption within and about the Women's League.

Then, two even younger monsters, Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin appeared on the scene and were now already contending with Ryou and Machi for supremacy.

In the same position Sasari once was, however, Ryou and Machi never considered backing down from a fight.

Instead, they channeled their adverse circumstances into strength and were now colliding like titans on this very stage.

Past accolades meant nothing.

Neither clung to titles.

They merely—desired further strength.

——..... Even had one continued playing, I would never have achieved this .....

The spring breeze traveling along the Kamo River was much cooler and stronger than she expected.

Even so, her skin was soaked with sweat beneath her traditional robes.

That's how intense the heat radiating from the board in front of her eyes had



become.

—Thirsty ..... Water .....

She had reached for a cup filled to the brim with water many times but always restrained herself at the last moment. Consuming too much liquid would mean she would have to vacate her seat to visit a restroom, but she felt there would not be enough time.

—One cannot look away from this match for an instant .....!!

Even Sasari, who had long since discovered the limits of her own talent and locked away her own burning desire, was so drawn into the match that the lock was on the verge of breaking.

The breeze along the Kamo River continued to intensify.

The battle had begun to take its toll on the players, depriving them of both waiting time and physical endurance.

It appeared to be a straightforward clash on the surface, but their fatigue was only natural considering the immense amounts of information both were processing and the split-second decisions necessary to foil their opponent's plans.

As a result—both players had nearly exhausted their allotted waiting time at the end of the mid-game.

“Tsukiyomizaka-sensei. As your waiting time has expired, please proceed with one-minute Shogi.”

“Kay!!”

The woman known as the Aggressive Archangel responded with vigor, abandoning her Bishop and advancing her Rook across the board.

That was the moment it promoted into a Dragon, breaking through the last of Machi's defenses.

Its fangs now bared at her soft flank, Machi paused for one last deep reading session——.

“Kugui-*sensei*. As your waiting time has expired, please proceed with one-minute Shogi.”

“.....”

Machi Kugui nodded in silence before unleashing the strongest move she could surmise.

77th move——6 One Gold.

An *anaguma* user so tenacious she became known as Machi the Tormentor set out to destroy one.



**“6 One  
Gold!”**

**“5 Seven  
Rook  
Promotes!”**



“A check path to the defender’s King .....?!”

Sasari could only gasp in surprise at Ryou’s fearless decision in the face of death.

Machi deployed one of her precious few reserve pieces and Ryou responded by sacrificing one of her own major pieces.

—It’s only a matter of time before one falls .....!

However, the margin between them was so narrow that predicting the winner was no easy task.

Sasari’s fingers danced across the tablet but her eyes were locked on Ryou’s face, following her expression to gauge the Women’s King’s next move.

However, a moment later.

“Agh .....?!”

The strongest gust that afternoon forced Sasari to reflexively hold her hair down and instinctively close her eyes to protect them from the whirling strands of hair.

Then—.

“.....?”

When she opened her eyes once again.

Things that *should be there were nowhere to be found*.

“Oh?! Oh no .....!!”

She yelled, her face turning blue.

*All the pieces had disappeared from the board.*

Every single one had been swept up by the sudden gust.

The match that once was had been blown away.



Observer Seiichi Tsukimitsu was unable to comprehend the situation.

“..... What has just transpired?”

Inside a nearby building, Seiichi had gone to get his kimono straightened in preparation for the end of the match and did not know about the gust of wind or what happened to the pieces. He couldn't understand right away.

The one he could normally count on for an explanation, Sasari Oga, was not at his side this time.

Panic gripped the staff room.

“Wind? You're saying the pieces got blown away in the wind?!”

“What should we do?! If we're going to stop the clock and pick up the pieces  
.....”

“What if we can't find all of them, what then, huh?!”

“Do we have any spares on hand?!”

“We have pieces! Should we stop the clock?!”

“But, one-minute Shogi is already in effect!! If we stop the clock here——!”

“How are they supposed to play a decent match the way things are now?!”

As this had never happened before, no one knew what course of action to take.

The disarray was starting to spread to the audience.

“..... Hey. I don't see any pieces on the board, do you?”

“The wind up an' took 'em?”

“What’ll they do?! Suspend the match?!”

“But, whoever goes next will have an advantage if they pause the match now, right?”

The staff, the audience, anyone who was watching the match became engulfed in chaos.

The same was true for Sasari, sitting boardside.

One-minute Shogi rules were already active. The clock was running.

—What now?! Should one start the countdown ..... or stop the clock?!

“C-Chairman .....

Sasari moaned a plea for help, but of course Seiichi was not there.

If only it weren’t one-minute Shogi.

If only there weren’t a live audience.

If only the blind Seiichi Tsukimitsu wasn’t the observer.

Just as all the *if only*’s were piling up—.

Under the most improbable circumstances in Shogi history, most likely the first and last memorable match of its kind was about to be born.

“.....”

Completely at a loss, the match recorder Sasari Oga turned her gaze toward Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and awaited her move.

She wanted her to say, “Stop the clock.” She thought she would.

Because, by doing just that, Ryou would gain a considerable time advantage from this difficult situation. By doing just that, she would increase the probability of claiming the title for herself.

But, she didn’t.

Not a single muscle on her face budged as Ryou Tsukiyomizaka pointed to one

spot on the board and declared.

“6 Nine Silver.”

She said her move aloud.

Under one-minute Shogi rules, should the player be unable to physically move a piece on the board, a verbal declaration was acceptable.

In essence, Ryou was saying, *If we can't use the board, let's keep going with the one we got in our heads. You can keep it up, right?*

Loud and clear.

Then, she glared in Sasari's direction.

“.....!!”

Almost out of reflex, she entered the following into the tablet—“86th move –defender –6 Nine Silver.”

—An extremely aggressive advance! Has she read her own victory?! She'll win at this rate .....!!

However, Ryou was not the only player involved.

If this unprecedented public match—a title match no less—were to continue as a blind Shogi match, it would require the approval of one more person.

Further still, compared to Ryou's watch-and-react *hair trigger* playing style, Machi was more of a thinking type and should prefer having pieces on the board for reference.

—Fighting the late game on only mental Shogi boards ... would put her at an overwhelming disadvantage. What will she do?!

Sasari studied Machi's face.



As a title holder, as a player in this match, Machi had the right to ask for a suspension.

She only had to say one thing ... just one.

*Stop the clock and call the observer.*

That was all.

Doing so would be perfectly acceptable under these circumstances, and if she did ..... She would gain enough time to decide whether now was the time to attack or defend at this pivotal moment of the match.

“.....”

Machi, however, didn't take long to make a decision.

Her mind was already made up the moment Sasari glanced up from the tablet and made eye contact with her.

Yamashiro Ouka announced.

“8 Eight Gold.”

Those words, nothing more.

It was—a signal to continue the match.

*I shall not yield a step. A fight once picked shall be finished posthaste!*

That was Machi Kugui-Yamashiro Ouka's response.



“Th—.”

Looking at the update from Ms. Oga's tablet, I can't believe my eyes.

“They’re going to keep playing blind Shogi?!”

I turn to look at the players on stage.

Both of them are rocking back and forth like there’s no tomorrow and calling out their moves rather than moving pieces with their hands.

No doubt about it. They’re going to fight without the board.

Right here, in the late game of an intense match.

“Is ..... is this okay?”

“It’s never happened before, no doubt about that ..... But, the results should ..... count .....”

It took everything I had to answer my flustered apprentice.

The scene is just bizarre.

One player, scratching her head as her face twists and contorts in pain. Then she shouts out a spot on the board with a beastly roar.

The other stares up at the heavens as she specifies her moves with melodic rhythm.

The boards they’re using only exist in their minds.

Devoting every single resource they have to the match, neither of them care about how they look in front of the audience.

But, even more bizarre—was how shockingly precise the match record coming out of their mental duel is .....

I’m not sure who, but someone’s whisper in the front row echoes through the air.

“A match for the ages .....”

No one is saying anything otherwise.

A public match ... and this is Women’s Shogi.

Biased Shogi fans would reject the idea of a memorable match happening based on those two conditions alone.

But, the match record taking shape right before my eyes has the potential to destroy every smidgen of those preconceived ideas.

What's more ..... Without using a board .....

Women's League players? In front of the crowd?

Irrelevant.

Pro or Women's League doesn't matter at all.

As long as overwhelming strength and an intense desire to win collide, that's all that is needed for a memorable match to happen.

"..... Intense!!" I whisper as the latest update comes to my phone.

No Shogi player on the planet could look at this match record and not get fired up.

"So? So? Who gwonna win?"

"Don't ask me ..... I can't read anything!!" Mio practically screams at Charlette's question.

Ayano has her eyes clenched tight right next to them, her hands together as if praying to whatever higher power would listen.

"Big Sister Machi .....!!"

Ryou attacks, and she keeps attacking.

As if she's transformed into a real Aggressive Archangel, she's abandoned defense entirely and keeps on turning up the pressure.

"2 Eight Rooook!!" she howls, deploying a Rook from her nonexistent piece stand.

Machi has held everything off perfectly up to this point, but——.

# "6 Nine Gold!"

“!! ..... That move is .....”

Bad move. She sounded confident, but that move right there might be why she losses if she can't find a way to come back.

“It looks like not using a board has come back to bite her ..... Machi was so focused on protecting her King that she wasn’t seeing the whole picture. She’s been so intent on *defending* that she missed the right timing to attack ..... She’ll go into a tailspin at this rate!”

Ryou tipped the balance that Machi was holding together by the skin of her teeth.

Right now, in this checkmate-or-be-checkmated point in the match, one girl caught a whiff and is charging toward victory.

“Here—.”

Ai, staring at the big board next to me, plops down on to her ankles.

Then, starts rocking back and forth.

“Here, here, here, here,  
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere  
herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——.”

Just like the players themselves, Ai tries her hand at reading to the end of this incredibly complicated late game scenario using all 11 of her mental Shogi boards.

“On the 104th move——.”

“..... Ai?”

"The defender will win if she plays 2 Nine Rook Promote."

“! ..... I see.”

I read the same thing. And the match is flowing in that direction.

But another mistake happens.

Rather than promoting her Rook at 2 Nine like Ai suggested, Ryou plays——.

“9 Five Knight?!”

“She jumped the gun ..... But, Machi is in check. If she doesn’t pull off a perfect defense, she’s still going to lose!”

Machi has two choices right now.

Hide the King inside her defenses.

Or, jump out from behind them and attack enemy lines head on.

“..... What will you do, Machi? You can keep your King safe inside the castle. But, victory won’t come to you that way.”

In this situation, biding time and waiting for your opponent to mess up is an option.

But, if you break out of that *shell* and shoulder the risks that come with advancing—that’s where opportunity to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat is waiting.

“.....”

Machi, who had been facing up toward the sky all this time, looks down.

Ms. Oga starts the countdown.

“30 seconds .....”

Machi is torn.



“40 seconds——.....”

It's not so much that she's reading ahead.

“50 seconds. One, two, three.”

It's more like a lost kid trying to decide if they should go forward or retrace their steps.

“Four, five, six, seven, eight, n——.”

“9 Six King.”

Whoa!!

Members of the audience who understood what that place on the board meant couldn't contain their excitement.

“What's happened?!”

“The King left the castle ..... I'm stunned!”

And many other conversations like it are popping up everywhere.

They're right. Machi has moved her King outside of the castle's protection and chosen the forward path.

Realizing I hadn't been breathing, I take a breath and grumble.

“..... She broke the shell. Great, I'll have to keep that promise after all .....”

“?”

Ai looks up at me with questioning eyes. I'd better be more careful .....

“Tsssk!! Cheeky little! 2 Nine Rook promotes!!”

Ryou takes aim at Machi's isolated King, charging toward it like a maniac flying across a bloodied battlefield.

But Machi evades all her advances instantaneously.

She successfully escapes seven consecutive checks. She read it perfectly.

Then, Machi finds the move that Ai and I knew would tip the scales in her favor.

We turn our microphones back on the moment 111th move, ♗ 6 Three Bishop comes in from Ms. Oga's tablet.

"Deploying a Bishop there is a brilliant counterpunch."

"It sure is, Master! A Reverse Check Path!"





Whooooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaa!!

The audience is bubbling with excitement.

Offense and defense switch places as if the cheers had put wind in their sails.

Now it's Machi's turn to target Ryou's King in the very corner of the board and promote a Pawn right in front of it.

“Cracking a castle open with Promoted Pawns ..... it’s a solid, steady approach but also the fastest way to get it done.”

# The perfect *anaguma* breaker.

Machi's line of sight has always been up in the air, but now it's trained on one point on the board—where she must trap Ryou's King at 9 One. But, there's a hint of sadness in her eyes.

Partly as a tribute to the *anaguma*, the strategy that got her to where she is today and also as a farewell to the person she once was, the one who gave up because she wasn't talented.

Her expression unchanging, she says melodically, "7 Three Knight."

Once Machi deployed that Knight on the 135th move ...

“ .....

Ryou opens her eyes for the first time in a while, sits up straight, fixes her kimono and takes a drink of water before saying in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

Not her next move, but—.

“I lose.”

Giving her opponent an unmistakable bow, the Challenger surrenders.

Match Three came to an end in that moment and Machi Kugui's defense of the Yamashiro Ouka title was complete.

And also, she became only the second Woman's League player behind Rina Shakando-*queen quadruple title* to earn a Women's Eternal Title—Queen Yamashiro Ouka.



After the match.

Both players zoned out for a bit. After working at full speed to finish that late game, I don't blame them.

Journalists and cameramen surrounded the two exhausted players as the crowd that had watched since the very beginning gave them a riveting round of applause.

Then the match recorder, Ms. Oga guides them up to the big board.

Ai and I, along with every single Shogi fan in attendance (there isn't an empty seat anywhere) greet them as they step onto the stage.

Mio and Charlette are so excited in the front row that their faces have turned bright pink and their hands are a blur as they clap along with everyone. Meanwhile, Ayano's red eyes are looking up at her older sister apprentice with the utmost respect and admiration.

"That was a fantastic match. Talk about a close one!"

The players stand on either side of the big board.

The completely drained Machi Kugui is next to me.

And, visibly fuming with the agony of defeat, next to Ai is Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

These two probably have so much competitive juice still left in their veins

after the match that they couldn't stand next to each other if they tried.

Don't forget that Ryou said she would *rip the title out of Machi's dead hands if she had to* before the match.

Even if it didn't get to that point, losing that way after taking the series to a final match is going to leave a deep scar on the loser's heart ..... These two will never be able to go back to the way they used to be.

Almost as if proving I'm right to be worried.

"....."

Neither Machi nor Ryou responds to my opening words in any way.

"W-Well, um ..... There are so many interesting points to reflect on! Your decision to use a Ranging *Anaguma* was particularly surprising, Ms. Tsukiyomizaka. Was that your plan from the start?"

Once I ask that question, Ai lifts her microphone high over her head from her spot at Ryou's feet to bring it even with her mouth.

The anger on Ryou's face doesn't change at all as she ...

"Fork it over."

"Ah!"

She forcefully snatches the microphone out of Ai's hand and holds it to her face upside down like a villain in some pro wrestling show and says, "Planning to use an *anaguma*? 'Course that was my plan!"

Ryou turns to face me and the shocked audience.

"It's called a sneak attack, got it? Sneak –attack! I thought it'd be the perfect follow-up to roastin' Machi's *anaguma* in Match Two. I was sure as hell she'd get pissed off if I used the same thing against her and she'd try to make me pay for it. Well, I guess she did just that 'cause I couldn't hold off her attack and my own *anaguma* got crushed in the end! Got that, you *kuzu* trash heap?!"

“I-I got it! Crystal clear!”

“The hell are you askin’ the loser somethin’ like that right after the match, huh? Freakin’ *kuuuuzuuuuuuuu* pile of traaaaaaash!!”

“Hey?! You don’t have to get so angry at me! Of course, *I* understood what you were going for using a Ranging *Anaguma*, but it’s better for all the fans to hear it right from the player’s mouth, don’t you think?!”

“Just shut up, already!! Shuuuut uuuuup——!! Besides, everyone here’s in Machi’s camp anyway! That’s right, I know all of you pieces of crap were quietly wishin’ I’d hurry up and lose the whole time, right——?!!”

A loser’s temper tantrum.

The audience doesn’t seem all that angry with her, more just surprised. Heck, I’m surprised, too. People tend to keep their emotions in check after losing these days ..... Though, my Master did pee out the association window after losing .....

But, in the middle of all that——.

“U-umm .....

Timidly shaking at Ryou’s feet, Ai works up the courage to ask a question of her own.

“Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei*? When you played that Silver ..... Did you already .....?”

..... Silver?

Of course, the deployed Silver that Ai is referring to——was the move immediately after the wind wiped the board clean.

The first move that Ryou said out loud, that move.

She gives an honest answer right away.

“Yeah. I knew I’d end up one move short when I played 6 Nine Silver.”

“Eh?”

Machi is stunned, her eyes open wide.

“Wha .....? Could not win .....? With that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? That’s why I charged ahead with blind Shogi ..... I thought I’d win by rushin’ you and playin’ without seeing a board would shake you up.”

No one could hide their surprise.

But, it’s not at the fact that she chose to play blind.

It’s because Ryou had already read up to her own defeat at that point.

I knew it ..... Ryou is strong!

But, today, the stronger player was——.

“But, that one there didn’t turn tail. She stood up to my off-the-board tactics, Ranging *Anaguma* sneak attack, took everything in stride. She was too good. I couldn’t do a thing. I lost.”

Ryou juts her thumb in Machi’s direction as she speaks, shoulders sinking a little too far.

Oh, she’s hurting. It’s obvious she wants to scream it all out right now.

But, there’s something bright about the look on her face.

Sure, she has a foul mouth and vented a lot of frustration on me, the analyst, but ..... As far as losers go, she’s got dignity.

Next, I turn my microphone toward the winner.

“Ms. Kugui. How about a word to the fans?”

“Huh?”

Looking around as if she wasn’t expecting to be asked a question, she hesitates for a few seconds before taking the microphone out of my hand.

It only took her a moment after that to start stringing words together.

“Right now ..... I am too overwhelmed with a plethora of emotions to know what to say .....

Her voice is hoarse.

She looks like she’s having trouble finding words.

So, I ask Machi a question instead.

“Why did you decide not to use an *anaguma*?”

“..... A constant dilemma lurked in the back of my mind. Should I leave well enough alone .....? Was there any meaning to using an *anaguma* to protect the title I claimed with an *anaguma* .....? What meaning was there in my being a Women’s League player, in my being Yamashiro Ouka .....?”

Her response was intended for the audience.

But, it was also an answer for last night.

“After my defeat in Match Two, that didn’t matter to me anymore. I wanted to attempt the Shogi of those I admire, those with talent ..... Though, I was bewildered to find my opponent mimicked my own style as well .....

“.....!”

Ryou looks at Machi with wide eyes.

“Lucky fingers guided me to victory on this day, but they very well may not in the future. Would it behoove me to hone the *anaguma* further still or to replicate the style I employed today? Can I continue improving as I am now .....? Is there a meaning to my continued participation in Women’s Shogi .....? My doubts have yet to be put to rest, but .....

But——.

The second Queen Yamashiro Ouka in history continues with confidence.

“Shogi has never been as enjoyable as it was today.”

Then, after a deep bow, she adds with all her might.

“So that I may take part in another match like the one that just transpired .....  
I shall humbly retain the Yamashiro Ouka title for one more year.”

Thunderous applause erupts as pink cherry blossom petals flutter down onto the stage.

# (MATCH JOURNAL)

I knew the match was as good as over the moment 8 Three Knight was played on the 125th move.

However, I did not hold out by playing 5 One Pawn and 6 One Gold with hopes of my opponent making a mistake.

This may sound like nothing more than an excuse, but ..... That wasn't my intent.

Even before the series began, I made up my mind to play to the point when a checkmate was obvious, even if I was going to lose, so it would be easy for the audience to understand.

Escalating like the match did, that intention disappeared altogether.

I simply didn't want the match to end.

To be blunt, continuing to play Shogi with the knowledge you are going to lose is painful.

The moment it happens is also painful.

However, in the middle of all that pain, there's ..... and I'm not sure if this is the best way to put it, a *light* that shines through.

*Strength is all that matters in the Shogi world.*

I've written that in a match journal just like this one before.

My opinion has not changed at all.

Maintain isolation, like Ginko Sora, and simply aim to be the best.

I wholeheartedly believe this is the right path to take and I've always admired those who walk it.



That's why I entered the Sub League, to chase after the strongest one I know. Because I thought that was right. Because no one gets stronger by only playing against Women's League players and because living life that way wouldn't mean anything. Because I believe that people can become strong as long as they have an enemy to defeat.

The person I was back then was right.

After being forced out of the Sub League and returning to the Women's League ranks, I had changed.

I could relate to fellow Women's League players, and even felt camaraderie with them. I respected my opponent during matches.

Those naïve emotions may have robbed me of strength in terms of wins and losses. Should anyone make that claim, it would be difficult for me to say otherwise. After all, I lost like I just did.

But, I do have a thought.

While there is only one goal, I believe that an infinite number of ways exist to reach it.

Once I got ousted from the Sub League, losing both my dreams and my confidence at the same time, the ones who accepted me as their own were the very people I used to look down on: Women's League players.

There was one in particular, my opponent in this title match, who not only invited me to practice groups and played versus matches against me but also wedged her way into my personal life as well. Sometimes a bit too much (haha).

She helped me integrate into Women's Shogi. I was never good at interacting with other people, but she took me from place to place anyway.

I wasn't alone anymore.

She and I could grow strong together. I was determined to make it happen.

The unfortunate part was that results are the only way to get recognized in

this world and my personal resolve and passion for the sport will eventually get buried in Shogi history.

I feel like it's a waste whenever I think about it, and it hurts.

I'm certain that Machi Kugui feels much the same way, which is why she found a different way to make her mark on history and became a Shogi journalist.

I, on the other hand, don't possess that talent.

Even getting what's in my heart down on paper for this journal is taking forever. Every letter I line up on the sheet makes me feel like I'm drifting farther and farther away from how I really feel and it's irritating.

I think that Shogi is all I have.

In that case, I should open my heart on the board.

Not be afraid to lose and certainly not be afraid of rejection.

My first ever rival and (arrogant as it sounds) the professional player I'm chasing once had this to say: *It's not a loss if your heart hasn't broken.*

True to his word, no matter how many times he lost or what the rest of the world had to say about him, he never gave up.

I think that's why I'm trying to be so strong. I will be strong.

I want to be strong enough to never lose sight of what I have to do no matter what the fans at some Shogi event yell at me.

Just like how I used *anaguma* in this match, I want the strength to show off my research and play my way no matter who sits across the board from me.

As I've written before, Shogi fans have given me a rather generous nickname.

The *aggressive* part of Aggressive Archangel has to come from the ability to press forward and attack without fear.

As for the *angel* part, that's a being that's been given a mission by a higher

power and was dispatched to this world to carry it out.

Which means——.

Pressing forward, forward, forward is my mission as a Women's League player. At least, I think so.

Thank you for reading this rambling journal entry to the end.

Mark my words. I will be returning to this stage next year.

Challenger Ryou Tsukiyomizaka

# FOR THE AFTERWORD: *ABOUT A CERTAIN BOOKSTORE EMPLOYEE*

Thank you for reading *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* Book 8.

Back when I first started this series, I had intended for the two young women in the Review Session to be exclusively for that part of the book. But they've become so popular that I decided to make them the stars of this particular volume. Sasari Oga, too. Seriously, I like Sasari a lot.

On the other hand, doing so meant that the main cast didn't have as much time in the spotlight ..... Therefore, I've included the hard-to-find Drama CD that came with Book 2 along with short stories released online.

Since the Afterwords in Books 6 and 7 were on the heavy side, I decided to lighten things up this time.

That, and ..... word that *the Afterwords are too heavy* has reached my ears lately .....

At its heart, this story is a comedy so I can understand not wanting to read something too serious at the end. Sorry .....

So, without further ado, something fun for the Afterword!

Let me take you back to a time before *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* was published.

GA Bunko was about to celebrate their 10th-year anniversary in Japan and looking for a way to increase sales in the Kansai area.

Thus, they decided to invite bookstore employees from all over the region to participate in a workshop to find out what the people in charge of stocking the shelves thought would sell.

Though I wasn't there, the consensus they arrived at was *the story takes place in Kansai, so let's lead the push with The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* or so I've been told.

By the way, the reason the book cover is smooth is because someone said: *being shiny makes it harder to see the illustrations under the store's fluorescent lights* at that workshop.

That's how *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* Book 1 became featured in bookstores all over Kansai as GA Bunko announced its 10th anniversary lineup.

Now, as for how I was doing at that time .....

Just as I wrote in Book 6, my grandfather, who was more like a father to me, had passed away.

Consumed by grief, I was determined to make this series into a hit no matter what I had to do to honor his memory.

One method I decided to try was Twitter, and I began plugging the series as much as I could——.

Which is how I came across a certain picture.

A Shogi journalist had retweeted a photo of a display from a bookstore in Kobe showing a Shogi board right in the middle of the sales floor.

They put a small *tatami* mat down with a board, effectively turning their light novel section into an arena in order to advertise *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* that was due to be released the following month.

It trended among Shogi fans for little while, which means that there are some people out there who found out about *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* thanks to that very bookstore.

I was overjoyed and my first thought was: *I need to thank them for going this far!*

Unfortunately, it's not easy to get to Kobe, and coming all the way from Gifu just to say *thank you* in person might end up causing problems on their end. So, I couldn't convince myself to just up and go .....

About one month after my grandfather died.

On a scorching hot August day.

I woke up that morning with an epiphany.

"I'll base the second book in Kobe, do some research around town and stop by that bookstore ....."

I'm sure the mindset of *doing whatever I could* after my grandfather's death was piling on extra pressure.

Not to mention that Gifu's soccer team FC Gifu was doing a collaboration with my other series *Nourin* at the time and had been scheduled to play a match in Osaka. Watching that match was another reason for me to go.

With everything lining up, I got up bright and early that morning to go to Nagoya and ride the bullet train to Kobe.

Once there, I collected the information I needed before I finally got around to paying that bookstore a visit.

Just like in the picture, the Shogi board was right in the middle of their light novel section. It stuck out like the world's biggest sore thumb .....

An employee happened to be in the area, so I said hello.

"Sorry to bother you. May I ask who it was that set up this Shogi board?"

"That would be me ....."

"Thank you so much! This is my book!"

I pointed at that board and barely managed to introduce myself. Though she was surprised that the author of a book that hadn't been released yet would show up at the store unannounced like that, the employee seemed very happy

that I did.

She then told me that she only just became responsible for the light novels and still had much to learn. She had considered many different marketing strategies, but making this small arena seemed like the most certain way to sell the product.

This employee had participated in GA Bunko's workshop and had participated in the exchange of ideas that took place.

In fact, she read *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* before its release and thought, *This is good! It'll sell for sure!* among other things ..... She talked about so many ideas she had for advertising *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* that I could barely get a word in.

*What a passionate person!* I remember thinking to myself.

Not only did she have good ideas, her strategies worked wonders for sales.

That shop in Kobe sold just as many copies of Book 1 as the bigger, famous bookstores in Akihabara. I think they might've sold the most in Japan at one point.

That store invited me to do a book signing when Book 2 was released.

Wanting to match her passion stride for stride, I committed myself tenfold to the business side of being an author. I went from store to store in Kansai and Tokai (central Japan) signing books, writing special short stories and doing anything I could to help sell books.

While it didn't reach *big hit* levels, *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* started selling more and more as time went by.

I lost contact with that bookstore employee during my sales ventures .....

*I wonder what she's up to now,* I remember thinking to myself while looking around a location of that chain bookstore in my hometown when I happened to

spot her working in that very store.

Apparently, she had been transferred there during our time out of contact.

I was floored to say the least.

But, now that she was much closer to home, I said hello without tripping over myself like I did the first time and we started working together once again.

Now with a powerful ally close by, *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* started selling better than ever before around my hometown and it started winning awards from the Shogi Pen Club and *Kono Raito Noberu Ga Sugoi!* (This Light Novel Is Amazing!) as well. It wasn't long afterward that the series had grown enough in popularity to be made into an anime.

Now then, what is this bookstore employee who supported *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* from before it was published up to now?

Not only is she supporting my work, she is a cornerstone of my life.

Exactly three years to the day that we met, I married her.

After my mother passed away and I became the last one left in my family tree, for the first time in my life, I gave some serious thought to what kind of person I wanted to join me on this journey called life. No matter how many ups and downs there are from here on out, I want to write the stories that I want to write. And, I want someone even more passionate at my side while I'm working.

Once that occurred to me, her face immediately came to mind.

The way I see it, my grandfather led me to her and my mother gave me one last push.

She is a far better wife than I deserve.

If there's one thing that bugs me ..... It's the fact that she is *seven years younger* than I am.



That's the exact age gap between Yaichi and Ai Hinatsuru .....

However, compared to a relationship between a sixteen-year-old and a nine-year-old, a man in his early 30s being with a woman in her mid-20s doesn't feel strange at all. In fact, I find myself thinking: *so this is what a seven-year difference feels like* and forget all about it soon after.

My only concern is that someone on her side of the family will, knowing what I write, notice the gap and think: *Should've known* ....., After all, no excuse will ever be good enough to convince them otherwise ....., One more experienced author and friend offered his advice (?) by saying, "I got labeled a *lolicon* up, down and sideways with only a five-year difference, so be ready for it ....."

Perhaps this is my punishment for calling Yaichi a *lolicon* so many times in the story .....

On many levels, *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* is a series that has transformed my life.

I highly doubt I would have met my wife without it.

If I had never met her, I would've never realized that there are people who are even more passionate about the series than me, the author.

In order to live up to all the love and passion *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* has received, I'll be writing with even more passion than ever before.





*Review  
Session*

“Yep, I knew you’d be here.”

A day after the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match ended.

I came to the Kansai Shogi Association bright and early but found that two people got here before me, and they’re in the middle of a practice match.

“Agh? What’d you mean by *knew it*?”

“Ryuo-san, much obliged for yesterday≡”

Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and the newly crowned Queen Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui fresh off defending her title.

Seeing the two of them play a practice match like they always did before facing off for the title is such a relief.

“Meh, there’s no point getting upset over every little thing.”

“I have no reason for dismay as I completed a successful defense≡”

Ryou looks like she’s stopped caring about everything and anything while Machi seems like she’s walking on air.

Many people want to have Match Three recognized as a memorable match this year (which would be a first for Women’s Shogi if it ranks in). After playing a match like that, the result doesn’t seem as important anymore. Though, I’m sure the winner feels even better about it.

Taking a seat next to Ryou, I look at the board and ask, “Having a practice match? Who’s got the advantage?”

“This ain’t a match. We’re researching here, researching.”

“After two consecutive days of fierce competition, playing another match with a win or loss hanging in the balance would be far too stressful.”

I agree. Looking over the board, they’re working through one of the latest strategies.

Since Machi is typing away on a smartphone next to the board, they must be working with another practice group someplace else. A lot more people have been doing this style of practice session recently.

“But, yeah, you sure got it rough,” says Ryou, looking at me after she moves a piece on the board.

“Huuuh? How so?”

“The Mynavi Finals, Mynavi. If Gothic Small Fry ends up beating Machi to become the challenger, she’s got a five-match series against Ginko, yeah? You’re caught in the middle even worse than when Machi and I went at it.”

Gothic Small Fry ..... She must be talking about Ai Yashajin.

Machi slyly grins at me like a fox and piles it on.

“Most certainly. Your second mistress is trying to take your elder sister’s title. Indeed, you are caught between a rock and a hard place. But of course, I have no intention of allowing that to come to pass.”

“Second mistress ..... Do you mean Ai Yashajin?! Please, never say that again! You’re going to get me killed!”

“By whom?”

“Both!”

Out of the entire Kiyotaki Shogi family, those two facing off is the worst possible combination. Including practice matches, I don’t think they’ve ever played against each other.

If those two end up having to fight it out ..... The thought is so terrifying I don’t want to picture it. The only thing I know for sure is that I won’t be walking away in one piece.

“From Small Fry’s point of view, Ginko’s like a sister-in-law, right? That’s a fight waiting to happen.”

“Whose side shall you take, Ryuo-san?”

“Both of theirs.”

From where I’m standing, I would love for both of them to play their best and see people clamoring to nominate them like what happened during the Yamashiro Ouka Title Match.

I’ll do whatever I can to make that happen, but not in a way that requires me to play favorites.

Unfortunately, that answer won’t be enough for these two——.

“Get off the fence, Ryuo-san. We’re inquiring about who you’ll stand with.”

“H~mm ..... Well, Big Sis is used to these title matches. As Ai’s Master, it’s my responsibility to make sure she’s ready.”

“You’re gonna get knifed.”

“Agreed. Run through but good.”

“Would you please not predict how I’m going to die?”

Because, I’m worried that that’s exactly what’s going to happen!

“..... But, actually, I came here today to ask you two about that.”

“Ways to give Ginko a leg-up without anyone finding out?”

“No, not that.”

I put on a serious face and ask.

“This will be Ai Yashajin’s first title match, so do you have any advice I can pass along to her from a woman’s point of view? I can’t give her the full picture and it’s not like she can go to Big Sis for help.”

“Very true ..... Perhaps it would be prudent to review proper waiting time usage with her.”

“For sure. Regular Women’s League matches don’t have much waiting time at

all but when title matches come around you suddenly have a heck of a lot more. It can be confusing.”

“I see, I see.”

That’s something I should be able to teach. Pro League matches normally have lots of waiting time.

“And ..... Ah! You’d better be sure she knows this, got it? But, having her learn from trash like you would be a bit .....

“Just tell me, okay, Ryou?”

“I’m talkin’ about kimono here, kimono. Now there’s a rule that says we’ve got to wear kimono for the Queen Title Match, so it’d be better to get her used to wearing one ASAP.”

Oh .....

“Agreed. There’s a certain technique to playing Shogi in kimono.”

Machi moves a piece on the board before rubbing her chest.

With those glorious boobs of hers jiggling just right, I get the feeling that today is definitely a good day.

“It’s the bosom that’s the most uncomfortable. Men’s kimonos are tied just above the waist, but women’s confine the chest when tied. Breathing can sometimes be laborious, which makes the prospect of focusing on Shogi nearly impossible.”

“Oh, I see .....

“Really? Sure, it gets tight across the chest after eating, but I haven’t had that problem much at all.”

“Probably not, no,” I say with a nod right away, which was followed by Ryou’s fist almost as quickly. That’s great. She seems to have completely recovered from losing yesterday ..... But now I’m the one in pain.

“Want me to smash your face in, *Kuzu*?! Here we are, giving you serious advice so the half-pint might stand a chance against that female Shogi machine .....!”

“But you know. When it comes to boobs, Big Sis is just as flat. She’s a good match for a grade school girl, don’t you think?”

“Wait, wait, wait. I’m sure Ginko’s got more of a bustline than that.”

“Nope, nope. They’re still flat as a board and barely there.”

“Should you be so frank? Ginko will have your head if that should reach her ears.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I learned my lesson a long time ago.”

I take out my smartphone and show Machi the screen.

“I know exactly what’s on Big Sis’s schedule. She won’t come to the association today. Not only is her practice session with Keika on the schedule, Keika sent me a picture of the two of them playing earlier this morning.”

“Well then. By the way, Ryuo-san.”

“Yes?”

“This smartphone here. Are you aware of the hands-free feature?”

Machi then points to the phone *currently connected to another practice session taking place in a different location*.

Almost on cue, a voice I know all too well echoes from it ..... A message from hell itself.

“Would you mind telling me what’s flat as a board and barely there?”

“B ..... Big S———.”

“You and your apprentice’s heads on a pike. Double skewer.”

She heard everything.



This could be the end of the Kuzuryu Shogi family.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

I finally got a chance to put the review session girls in the spotlight! I'd only intended to have them in that one section, but they worked their way into the main story before I knew it and are now part of the cast. They're just so dominant ..... and I think their looks make them into a charming duo. I hope their charms only get stronger with this book (^^)

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I never thought I would design a cover with these two. They're fun to read about and to draw.

# The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 8

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 8

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